



TRABAJO DE FIN DE GRADO

**Negative Language Transfer in Spanish Learners of English as
L2: A Corpus-Based Study of Prepositional Errors**

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Index

Abstract	4
1. Introduction	5
1.1. Justification	5
1.2. Objectives	5
1.3. Methodology and structure	6
2. Second language acquisition	6
3. Influence of L1 on L2	8
4. Language transfer	11
4.1. Concept	11
4.2. Types	13
5. The concept of error in SLA	14
5.1. Contrastive Analysis	16
5.2. Error Analysis	17
5.3. Interlanguage Theory	19
6. Research	21
6.1. Methodology	22
6.2. Classification of errors	23
6.2.1. Place prepositions	24
6.2.2. Time prepositions.....	25
6.2.3. Other patterns	26
6.2.3.1. Prepositional verbs	26
6.2.3.2. Verb + object + preposition	27
6.2.3.3. Verb + added preposition.....	28
6.2.3.4. Adjective + preposition	29
6.2.3.5. Noun + preposition	30
6.3. Results	30
7. Teaching proposal	34
8. Conclusion	38
9. References	40
10. Appendix	43
10.1. Fill-in-the-gaps	43
10.2. Role Play	44

10.3. Memory Game	45
10.4. Bingo Game	48

ABSTRACT

To what extent can the grammatical structures of a learner's mother tongue negatively influence second language acquisition? This study, based on the Cambridge Learner Corpus, aims to test the hypothesis that negative transfer from Spanish exists and affects the correct use of English as a target language among Spanish-speaking students. To this end, the study focuses on one of the grammatical categories that poses the greatest challenge for this group: prepositions. Furthermore, a qualitative analysis is conducted, taking into account sociolinguistic variables such as the learners' proficiency levels according to the CEFR, in order to identify possible patterns in the recurrence of errors. Based on the findings, a teaching unit is proposed with the aim of improving the instruction of English prepositions and addressing common errors caused by language interference.

Key words: mother tongue, Second Language Acquisition (SLA), Cambridge Learner Corpus (CLC), negative transfer, target language, prepositions, qualitative analysis, teaching unit.

RESUMEN

¿Hasta qué punto las estructuras gramaticales de la lengua materna de un estudiante pueden influir negativamente en la adquisición de una segunda lengua? Este estudio, basado en el Cambridge Learner Corpus, tiene como objetivo comprobar la hipótesis de que existen las transferencias negativas provenientes del español que afectan el uso correcto del inglés como lengua meta entre estudiantes hispanohablantes. Para ello, se ha tomado como objeto de estudio una de las clases gramaticales que más dificultades presenta para este colectivo, las preposiciones. Asimismo, se lleva a cabo un análisis cuantitativo considerando variables sociolingüísticas como son el nivel de competencia del estudiante según el MCER con el fin de identificar posibles patrones en la recurrencia de errores. A partir de los resultados obtenidos, se propone una unidad didáctica orientada a mejorar la enseñanza de las preposiciones en inglés con el objetivo de solventar posibles errores derivados de la interferencia lingüística.

Palabras clave: lengua materna, Adquisición de una Segunda Lengua (ASL), Cambridge Learner Corpus (CLC), transferencias negativas, lengua meta, preposiciones, análisis cuantitativo, unidad didáctica.

1. Introduction

1.1. Justification

It is common knowledge that English is currently the most widely spoken language in the world, and it has become *lingua franca*. The growing importance of English as a global language started after the Second World War, a historical event that brought about significant social changes and the emergence of a strong demand for English learning. Consequently, this new context comes with the development of methods for learning English as second language (L2), such as the one proposed by Charles Fries. As a result, English is the most taught and studied language in the world. Concretely, in Spain, English is a compulsory subject and the most studied second language in primary school. In this context, Second Language Acquisition emerged as an area of study with many hypotheses aiming to explain how a learner acquires a second language. The vast majority of these studies have a pedagogical approach: seeking to explain how this process occurs in order to discover what are the most effective methods for second language teaching. One of the main factors researchers have considered is the influence the mother tongue has when learning a foreign language. Researchers agree first language (L1) plays a significant role in the acquisition of a second language. More specifically, this work is focused on how the mother tongue can negatively affect or interfere with the process of learning a second language, leading to learners' grammatical errors.

1.2. Objectives

The current work aims to analyse the influence the mother tongue has on Spanish native speakers when they acquire English as L2. Concretely, the main objective is to prove the existence of negative language transfers, referred to as interferences, in exam scripts written by Spanish students in Cambridge ESOL English exams. The negative transfers that have been selected for this study belong to a concrete grammatical group: the prepositions, which are one of the main sources of learner errors when learning English as L2. The samples are taken from the Cambridge Learner Corpus and they correspond to different Spanish students who participated in CEFR exams at different levels (B2, C1 and C2). The participants represent a range of ages, educational backgrounds, genders and quantities of years studying English. Through these parameters, we will prove the secondary objective, which is to determine whether negative transfers are more recurring in certain groups depending on sociological factors, in this case, their English proficiency according to CEFR parameters.

1.3. Methodology and structure

The structure used for this paper addresses the following points. Sections 2 to 5 cover the theoretical part of the study based on the bibliography of influential linguists in the SLA field (Lado, Selinker, Weinreich etc.). In section 2, a summary of the most important theories regarding second language acquisition is presented. Section 3 focuses on the influence a native language has in the process of learning a target language. Next, section 4 deals with a deep view into the influence L1 has on L2, introducing the language transfer phenomenon and its different types. After having delved into the concept of transfer, it is logical to discuss the role of error in second language acquisition, since errors are a direct manifestation of language transfer, especially negative transfers, this is explained in section 5. In section 6 the practical part begins; after talking briefly about the methodology and objectives, we expose the samples collected from the Cambridge Learner Corpus. These different samples of language transfers are classified, depending on the role of the preposition, into different categories. To finalize the investigation, the results and analyses found in the corpus are discussed. Taking these results into account, we present a proposal of a teaching unit, focused on prepositions, for English learners in section 7. Finally, we expose the conclusion of this work in section 8.

2. Second Language Acquisition

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a field that has been greatly developed in the last decades. The fact it is related to many other areas of study¹ turns SLA into an interdisciplinary field. Many hypotheses have been built around the study of SLA, the most important ones in the linguistics area are exposed next.

According to Gass and Selinker, Second Language Acquisition refers to “the process of learning another language after the native language has been learned. The second language is commonly referred to as the L2²” (2008:1).

“The dominant methods for teaching second languages in the 1960s were the grammar translation method³ and the audiolingual method⁴” (Ellis, 1997:5). Nevertheless, there barely existed studies about how learners actually learned L2. In the 1960s, new approaches aim to

¹ Linguistics, psychology, sociology among others.

² L2 can refer to any language learned after learning the L1, regardless of whether it is the second, third, fourth or fifth language (Gass & Selinker, 2008:455).

³ This method consists of studying and memorizing bilingual vocabulary lists and explicit grammar rules.

⁴ Consisting of emphasizing habit formation through repeated practice and reinforcement.

address the study of how learners acquire an L2. Studies in SLA have made language teachers aware that “language learning consists of more than rule memorization. More important, perhaps, it involves learning to express communicative needs.” (Gass & Selinker, 2008:3). At that point, studies of L2 learning started to gain importance and SLA was born.

One of the most rewarded theories on the heels of Krashen is the distinction between acquisition and learning as two different ways of developing competence in L2. On the one hand, the acquisition process is subconscious, similar to the way in which children acquire their mother tongue. On the other hand, learning is a conscious process in which the learner is aware of the rules of the grammar he is learning. In the words of Krashen, “some second language theorists have assumed that children acquire while adults can only learn. The acquisition-learning hypothesis claims, however, that adults can also acquire” (1982:10).

The Natural Order Hypothesis became also an important one as, through research, it made a useful discovery, “the acquisition of grammatical structures process follows a predictable order” (Krashen, 1982:12). Although there is no full agreement, investigations have concluded that there are some grammatical structures that learners tend to acquire earlier than others⁵. That also relates to errors in the sense that acquirers make similar errors in the different stages of L2 acquisition.

The Monitor Hypothesis became important due to the fact that it introduces some novelties in the acquisition-learning distinction. Krashen states that:

Normally, acquisition "initiates" our utterances in a second language and is responsible for our fluency. Learning has only one function, and that is as a Monitor, or editor. Learning comes into play only to make changes in the form of our utterance, after it has been "produced" by the acquired system (1982:15).

According to this theory, using the rules of a language is only possible if three conditions are fulfilled: time⁶, focus on form⁷ and knowing the rule. The existence of this Monitor explains why there are some L2 elements that performers can use correctly despite having not acquired

⁵ According to Krashen: “For example, the progressive marker -ing (as in “He is playing baseball”) and the plural marker /s/ (“two dogs”) were among the first morphemes acquired, while the third person singular marker /s/ (as in “He lives in New York”) and the possessive /s/ (“John’s hat”) were typically acquired much later” (1982:12).

⁶ To use the rules effectively, learners need to have enough time.

⁷ Time is not sufficient, learners also have to know the rule correctly.

them yet, breaking in this way the natural order⁸. Therefore, they can substitute their acquired competence with their learned competence.

The Input Hypothesis tries to explain how learners are able to understand structures that they have not acquired yet. The explanation, according to the supporters of this theory, is that learners use more than their linguistic competence to go from one stage in the learning process to the next one: the extra-linguistic information⁹. Additionally, it says that fluency in L2 emerges when the input is accurate and comprehensible. There is not an exact stage when the learner feels ready to produce proper speech utterances, it depends on the individual.

Finally, the Affective Filter Hypothesis studies how some external factors have an influence on the level of success in SLA process. The most important factors are motivation, self-confidence and anxiety. Depending on the level of the so-called affective filters, the degree of success in the acquisition process can vary. In this way, it is not only necessary to receive a comprehensible input that goes far beyond the acquirer's current level, as the Input Hypothesis stated, but also to create a situation in which the affective filter is weak or low¹⁰.

These theories are complementary rather than opposed. Each of them introduces some novelties in the field of Second Language Acquisition. To continue, we would delve into the influence the mother tongue has in SLA.

3. Influence of L1 on L2 in the learning process

The role that L1 plays when acquiring a second language has been studied by different authors among the last decades. Nowadays, the assumption that the first language has an impact on the process of learning a new one is undeniable. There are different points of view about how the mother tongue operates when we learn a foreign language.

According to Weinreich, "two or more languages are in contact when they are used alternately by the same persons" (1953:1). This contact between languages is unavoidable in the SLA process as there are two languages that influence each other, mainly L1 on L2¹¹. In the

⁸ "Only certain items can rise in rank, however, when Monitor use is heavy, this rise in rank is enough to disturb the natural order" (Krashen, 1982:18).

⁹ This refers to the context and our knowledge of the word.

¹⁰ This means, a situation in which the anxiety is low, the student is motivated and self-confident.

¹¹ Although this study is focused on transfers from L1 to L2, it is important to clarify that reverse transfer (from L2 to L1) also exists.

present case, we would focus on the influence of the mother tongue of Spanish native speakers when learning English as L2.

It is important to notice the most relevant differences between the acquisition of L1 and L2. While the acquisition of a mother tongue is inevitable as part of the human maturational process, learning a second language is optional. In addition, when acquiring the mother tongue, children do not have any previous knowledge of any other language, that is not the case of a second language learner who has previous knowledge and, a crucial factor, motivation. According to Corder, “a given motivation as well as intelligence are the two principal factors that correlate significantly with achievement in a second language” (1981:8).

Depending on the author, opinions regarding the importance and benefits of L1 influence on L2 vary. For instance, Corder defined this influence as “a heuristic tool which facilitates the learning of those features which resemble features of the mother tongue¹² (...) when languages are closed structurally, the facilitating effect is maximal” (1994:29). Therefore, this author considers it a communicative strategy that leads to structural transfer when the incorporation into the interlanguage system occurs.

For Krashen, L1 elements may be “substitutes” for learners when they want to produce an utterance in the target language but have not acquired enough of the L2 to do it correctly. In the words of this author, “first language influence may therefore be an indication of low acquisition. If so, it can be eliminated or at least reduced by natural intake and language use” (1981:67). Therefore, language influence is the result of the performer being “called on to perform before he has learned the new behaviour” (1981:67). To supply the lack of resources in L2, the learner makes use of old knowledge to compensate for what is not known.

On contrast, Chomsky stated that some of the strategies used by the child who is acquiring his first language are the same as those which are used by a second language learner¹³. Mentalist points of view, taking Chomsky among other linguists as reference, argue that L1 and L2 proceed in similar ways, but they are independent; therefore L2 acquisition is independent of L1 transfer. The main criticism for this position is that it offers no explanation for interference

¹² Lado explains that, when acquiring L2 vocabulary, “you immediately discover that some words will be easy to learn because they resemble native-language words, while others will present various kinds of difficulties because they differ from the native language in various ways” (1957:6). Nevertheless, this statement cannot explain the errors made due to lexical transfers as, for instance, the incorrect use of false friends.

¹³ This is based on his theory of Universal Grammar (UG), which argues that “children are able to learn their mother tongue because they have innate knowledge of the possible form that the grammar of any language can take” (Ellis, 1997:6). Chomsky tries to relate his UG theory to SLA.

errors¹⁴ (Alonso, 2002). This anti-transfer view isolates the native language and supports the idea that universal innate principles are the ones that guide the learning process.

On the other hand, Corder argues that the strategies used when learning L1 and L2 are not the same, he explains it in the following way: on the one hand, a L1 learner has a vast number of hypotheses about the language he is learning that must be tested. On the other hand, the task of a second language learner is simpler and unique: to test if the system of the language he already knows and the one he is learning are the same or not (1971). Proof of that is the irrefutable interference of the habits of the mother tongue when learning L2.

Following generative approaches, Gundel and Tarone argue that second language learning is a creative process in which learners construct hypotheses in the same way we assume first language learners do. Nevertheless, each process differs as, when learning L2, the hypotheses constructed are already influenced by the knowledge of the mother tongue the learner already possesses (1984). Basically, a second language learner already possesses a language and has the experience of learning one (Corder, 1994).

Taking as reference the idea that L1 “intrusion” is inevitable when learning a second language, Charles Fries was the first to argue that a systematic comparison of languages must be done to get effective materials to teach L2. This same theory was later proved and supported by Robert Lado. Linguists who have studied contact between languages have confirmed this theory, “they report that many linguistic distortions heard among bilinguals correspond to describable differences in the languages involved” (Lado, 1957:1). Taking the assumption that those habits established in childhood when acquiring the mother tongue interfered with the establishment of a new set of habits when learning a new language¹⁵, the role of the mother tongue in learning L2 gains much importance. In that way, and thanks to Contrastive Analysis theory, early studies on the role of the native language emerged, which contrast both L1 and L2 language systems. We would inquire into them lately.

To sum up, the role of the native language has been crucial in SLA research. This subfield of SLA has come to be known as language transfer. This concept would be explained in the following section.

¹⁴ “The fact that Spanish children perform better than Chinese when learning English as L2, reflects that the former can make more use of their L1, therefore it is related to cross-linguistic influence” (Alonso, 2002:50).

¹⁵ This position is based on behaviourism, specifically in Skinner’s theory of *stimuli and response*.

4. Language transfer

4.1. Concept

Although studies about *cross-linguistic influences*¹⁶ date back to the 19th century, it is not until the first half of the 20th century, when behaviourism was the most popular school of thought, that discussions about transfers emerged. The behaviourist learning theory argues that adults rarely learn something completely new, as information and habits acquired and internalized in the past will be their point of departure¹⁷. These studies try to explain why L2 learners cannot keep languages (L1 and L2) apart and mix and merge them when they are in contact. The main hypothesis regarding this concept is that “the learning of a task A will affect the subsequent learning of task B” (Gass & Selinker, 2008:66). Lado, in his book *Linguistics Across Cultures*, argues:

Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to the foreign language and culture – both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and receptively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and the culture as practiced by natives (1957:2).

Although the concept of *transfer* emerged in the behaviourist field, since the 1970s, when this theory was already considered outdated, researchers have tried to separate this concept from this school of thought. Due to that, the term *transfer* has been rejected by various authors who consider it misleading. For example, Corder considers that defining this process as a superficial transfer of patterns would suppose leaving the complex interactions that take place between L1 and L2 aside. He preferred the term *borrowing* to refer to a strategy that consists of “the temporary or permanent use of a linguistic feature from one language in the performance of another” (1994:26). On contrast, speaking of *borrowing* would be an oversimplification according to Weinrich, who states that, when foreign elements are introduced in a language structure, a reorganization of the patterns of the previous system must be done (1953). On the other hand, Kellerman, as well as Ellis, refuse this term due to its behaviourist connotations; the former prefers the term *cross-linguistic influence* to refer to the phenomenon.

¹⁶ This term refers to the way in which one language can affect another one within the same bilingual individual.

¹⁷ Behaviourism theory was applied to SLA, assuming that “habit formation lies behind language learning and that old habits facilitate or make the creation of a new habit more difficult depending on the differences and similarities between the L1 and the L2” (Alonso, 2002:20).

In this study, the term *transfer* has been chosen to refer to “the occurrence on learner’s performance of features of the mother tongue” (Corder, 1994:19), as it is the most widely used and accepted, extracted from any kind of connotation concerning the different schools of thought that have tried to redefine it throughout linguistic history.

Since the 90s a new approach appears, the generativist one, based on the framework of Universal Grammar (UG). If UG is available to L2 learners, they can apply L1 parameters to L2. This means that language transfer can be predicted by parameters as they are internalised in the grammar of the learner. New theories regarding language transfers developed in the generativist field, one of them is the Full Transfer/Full Access theory, defended by Schwartz and Sprouse:

The initial state of L2 acquisition is the final state of L1 acquisition. Therefore, the L1 grammar traces the starting point; the maximal amount of transfer is attributed to the L2 initial state, so the maximal amount of structure is also attributed over all to the L2 initial state (as cited in Alonso, 2002:64).

Currently, the emphasis is not on the affirmation or negation of the existence of this phenomenon, but, as Gass and Selinker argue, “on the determination of how and when learners use their native language and on explanations for the phenomenon” (2008:119).

Researchers agree on some principles that characterize the process of language transfer. One of them is selectivity, it has been proven that some L1 structures are more likely to be transferred than others. Another of these principles is similarity, the learners look for elements in the target language that are similar to the native language. Following with this idea, learners also try to create structures in the target language that are symmetric to the mother tongue ones (Alonso, 2002).

In fact, social conditions on the role of the learner also play a role in the presence of the language transfer phenomenon. According to Alonso, some of them are the stage of learning of the learner, his knowledge of other languages, his age or his mode of learning. Therefore, “transfer is not solely concerned with the linguistic structure of the L1 and the L2, as not only purely linguistic criteria account for this phenomenon” (Alonso, 2002:21).

4.2. Types

There are different approaches to language transfer that lead to different possible classifications. The first and most important one is based on the product achieved: positive (also known as *facilitation*) or negative (also known as *interference*) depending on whether transfer results in something correct or incorrect. This definition is ambiguous as an utterance that is considered correct in learners' interlanguage cannot be correct in the target language. Corder explains that:

Borrowing does not necessarily lead to incorrect utterances, but both correct and incorrect utterances may be successful in communication. Both similar (i.e., correct) and dissimilar (i.e., incorrect) forms may be incorporated into the interlanguage because they have communicated successfully (...) the incorrect forms are eliminated in the course of further learning while the correct items are incorporated into the permanent structure of the interlanguage. In this way the borrowing of correct forms leads to facilitation, that is, the acquisition of forms similar in the two languages (1994:26).

This distinction between positive and negative has been criticised by various authors because it only applies at the product level. Due to that, Gass and Selinker decided to do a clarification concerning the previous classification in his book *Second Language Acquisition: An Introductory Course*:

The actual determination of whether or not a learner has positively or negatively transferred is based on the output, as analysed by the researcher, teacher (...). In other words, the terms refer to the product, although the use implies a process (2008:68).

Transfers can also be classified depending on the perception the learner has of the similarities between languages (Alonso, 2002). Following these criteria, we can divide into *covert* and *overt* transfers. The former refers to the avoidance of rules and structures by the learner because they differ from the mother tongue ones. The latter is the most important for our study as it refers to the use of L1 rules and structures in L2.

In this work, we would use the universal classification between positive and negative, focusing on the role of the negative ones in order to study the errors made by students as a result of interferences from their mother tongue, Spanish, to English.

It seems logical that the greater the difference between two language systems, the greater is the area of interference. However, according to Weinreich interference also depends on extralinguistic factors such as proficiency in each language, manner of learning each language, or the speaker's ability to keep two languages apart; even the stereotyped attitudes towards each language are taken into account (1953).

To analyse interferences between two languages, it is important to state the differences and similarities between them in every domain (phonetics, grammar and lexical). In that sense, Lado proposed that a comparison between L1 and L2 in order to detect similarities and differences is crucial for the preparation of teaching materials. At this point, theories such as Contrastive Analysis emerged. They are exposed in section 5.

5. The concept of error in SLA

The treatment of error as a significant tool in the foreign language learning process has been crucial in the field of applied linguistics since the second half of the 20th century to the present day. Students' errors, as well as the different theories regarding them, deserve an important place in this work, as "errors have traditionally been considered as the patent carriers of transfers" (Alonso, 2002:24).

To begin with, it is important to specify the meaning of *error* and distinguish between different types. *A dictionary of linguistics and phonetics* defines the concept of *error* as "mistakes in spontaneous speaking or writing" (2008:173).

Corder made a classification of errors when he developed the Error Analysis theory. He classified them into errors of performance (or *mistakes*) and errors of competence (the so-called *errors*) (1961). For example, it is normal that in the process of acquiring their mother tongue, children produce incorrect utterances, these are mistakes whose nature is unsystematic, and they do not occur as a result of the lack of linguistic knowledge. Nevertheless, systematic errors of competence are not produced by lapses, and they allow us to reconstruct the learner's knowledge of the language to date¹⁸ (Corder, 1971). These errors of competence are the main objects of study in SLA as they give the teacher clues about the learners' progress and what

¹⁸ Critics regarding this classification say: "En la práctica, existe la posibilidad de que el profesor no pueda determinar hasta qué punto un error concreto se trata de un error sistemático o de una falta." (Rodríguez García, 2021:38). In practice, it is possible that the teacher may not be able to determine to what extent a particular error is a systematic error or a mistake [my translation].

techniques they employ. According to Corder, we would not be able to create proper conditions for the learning of a foreign language if we did not take these systematic errors into account. In this way, we would determine a syllabus, “adapting ourselves (teachers) to his needs (learner) rather than imposing on him our preconceptions of how he ought to learn, what he ought to learn, and when he ought to learn it” (Corder, 1967:169).

Additionally, Corder proposes another classification of errors into two categories: *interlingual* and *intralingual* errors¹⁹.

Interlingual errors, often named transfer errors, are those attributed to the first language (L1). These errors interfere with or prevent the language learner from, to some extent, acquiring the patterns and rules of the target language (Murtiana, 2019:207).

This type of error demonstrates how students rely on their mother tongue structures as a tool to learn L2. Meanwhile, intralingual errors have nothing to do with L1 influence:

Intralingual errors are due to the target language (L2) or the language being learned. They encompass these aspects: overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concept of hypothesis of some grammatical rules (Murtiana, 2019:207).

Interlingual errors are the ones we are going to take care of as the object of study in this investigation, as we are interested on how L1 can negatively interfere with the acquisition of a second language.

Finding the most problematic areas in second language learning would “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” (Corder, 1967:162). Hence, different theories such as Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis have been developed about the study of language learners' errors and their role in SLA in order to predict appropriate pedagogical methods and strategies. Each theory, rather than opposed to the previous one, tries to complement and overcome possible gaps to provide a most complete

¹⁹ Dulay and Burt deconstruct this idea later when they prove that sometimes one cannot determine whether an error is of one type or another (1974).

perspective on how to approach the concept of error when learning a second language. As Alonso states:

Error Analysis would not have been possible without Contrastive Analysis and the linguistic systems learners create -independent both from the first language and the second language, known as interlanguage- would have never been born without these precedent approaches. It is quite clear that all theories owe a great deal to their predecessors (2002:13).

The just-mentioned theories are exposed below.

5.1. Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive Analysis was a theory proposed by Charles Fries in his *book Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* (1945). Lately, one of his pupils, Robert Lado, synthesized the ideas previously presented by Fries and developed a methodology in his book *Linguistics across cultures* in 1957. At this time, Ghadessy argues, “the dominant belief was that a statement of the similarities and differences between various languages was enough to deal with the problems of teaching these languages” (as cited in Khansir & Pakdel, 2019:36).

The main reason for the emergence of this theory was trying to avoid possible errors made by L2 learners. Lado’s structuralist methodology consists of describing both language systems (L1 and L2) and comparing them in order to predict possible learning difficulties and discover why some elements of the target language are more difficult to be learnt than others. According to him, "those elements (of the target language) which are similar to (learner's) native language will be simple for him, and those elements that are different will be difficult" (1957:2). Therefore, the bigger the linguistic distance between one language and the mother tongue, the bigger the difficulties when learning the target language²⁰.

Therefore, this theory supports the idea that L1 structures and vocabulary are transferred from one language to another when learning L2, being one of the main conclusions that the prime cause of errors in foreign language learning is interference from the mother tongue. Taking this idea into account, this theory proposes that learners should focus on the differences

²⁰ Nowadays, this idea is barely accepted, there are even opposed approaches that believe that the bigger the differences between languages, the smallest the possibilities for making mistakes due, in fact, to this distance between systems. For instance, Kleinmann states that target languages which differ a lot from L1 are “easy to learn due to their saliency in the L2 input” (as cited in Selinker & Gass, 2008:127).

between L1 and L2, as they are the most problematic areas, when learning a language, leaving aside similarities between them.

Despite this theory having proposed many advances in SLA studies, the method is not solid and many incoherences are found in its methodology. This theory started to be challenged as long as behaviourism theory did. In Gass and Selinker words, “If children were not imitators and were not influenced significantly by reinforcement as they learned language, then perhaps second language learners were not either” (2008:73). Principally, many errors cannot be predicted using transfers as the subject of study. Furthermore, we cannot establish a relationship between the level of difficulty of a language for a learner and differences between L1 and L2; the concept of difficulty is subjective.

According to Rusiecki, studies regarding contrastive linguistics continue to be written currently, but they are mainly theoretical rather than applied to a pedagogical field (1976). This theory was substituted by a new approach called Error Analysis which is more general and incorporates contrastive linguistics’ ideas to explain interferences. In any case, it was necessary to pay attention to this approach as it was the basis for the next theories, and it introduced the importance of taking L1 into account in SLA.

5.2. Error Analysis

While Contrastive Analysts considered errors as a consequence of the use of incorrect teaching techniques and tried to avoid them, Corder initiated a new theory that supports the idea that errors are inevitable in any learning process, and we have to take them into account in order to find techniques to deal with them:

Éstos (los errores) se consideraban algo intolerable, que podían generar hábitos incorrectos y se proponía un aprendizaje sin errores a través de la repetición de enunciados, que tenían que llegar a automatizarse correctamente. El análisis de errores, sin embargo, considera al error tanto una pista sobre cómo se aprende una lengua extranjera, como una consecuencia necesaria del proceso de aprendizaje de la misma (Quero Guervilla, 2004:90).²¹

²¹ “Errors were considered something intolerable, as they could lead to the formation of incorrect habits as error-free learning through repetition of sentences -meant to be correctly automated- was proposed. However, Error Analysis views errors both as clues to how a foreign language is learned and as a necessary consequence of the learning process itself” [my translation].

At that moment, linguists left the Contrastive Analysis aside and argued instead for a new study as a reaction to the former²².

In that way, another linguistic approach to second language acquisition called Error Analysis appeared in Great Britain in the 1960s as a result of an article published by Corder: *The significance of Learner's Errors* (1967). This new concept is based on the study of errors and their causes as a procedure for discovering the mechanisms involved in the process of learning a foreign language. Corder's approach supposed an innovation regarding previous considerations since, for the first time, error was considered a necessary consequence of the foreign language learning process.

This new theory has a cognitive point of view, in contrast to the previous one which was behaviourist²³, so the objective is to identify learners' errors to predict L2 areas of difficulty in order to create useful pedagogical materials and strategies. According to Corder, errors made during the process of learning a foreign language are a natural part of language acquisition (1971). Therefore, "in EA theory, interlingual errors are not regarded as the result of old habits, but rather as a sign that the learner is in the process of internalizing the new system of the target language" (Murtiana, 2019:207).

An analysis of learners' errors helps teachers to discover what are the psycholinguistic mechanisms that take part in the learning process and the appropriate corrective techniques that can aid effective learning and teaching of English (Singh et al, 2017). This is the starting point of Error Analysis approach as a process to study how we learn a foreign language.

To analyse errors, linguists use real oral production of L2 learners as a reference. The communicative focus takes precedence over grammar competence. Now, the most important thing is to address learners' communicative needs and provide them with proper tools to handle different communicative situations. This has to do with Hymes' model of communicative competence²⁴ (Corder, 1971). Therefore, now the focus is not on creating correct written and

²² For some linguists, the main problem of Contrastive Analysis is that it represents an inadequate and fragmented research model that fails to explain all the errors students make. On the other hand, another group of researchers considers Error Analysis to be a complement to the results obtained by Contrastive Analysis, so that the latter constitutes a first stage of study.

²³ Chomsky criticised behaviourism and Skinner's studies as he considered they do not explain how humans learn languages in natural settings. Therefore, habit formation could not explain SLA (Alonso, 2002).

²⁴ It claims that the domain of a language is achieved not only by grammatical knowledge, but it also involves learning how to use language appropriately in any given context.

oral productions, but socially appropriate ones. This approach is closer to pragmatics and sociolinguistics.

Although this method gave good results into the second language pedagogical field, it is not infallible. Firstly, because reconstructing learner errors is not a fixed task, but subject to ambiguities and different options. In addition, so focused is this approach on studying learners' errors, that students' correct productions are left aside. Furthermore, it has been proven that learners use to evade structures that differ from their L1 when writing to avoid possible mistakes²⁵. In these cases, we have no real evidence of their knowledge of the target language, or their errors.

This approach was not conclusive, as it did not achieve a definitive solution for the doubts regarding methods for L2 teaching. However, it started a new consideration of the concept of error as a useful tool for SLA, and it opens the door to new approaches such as the one exposed in the next section.

5.3. Interlanguage theory

One of the most important contributions of Corder in Error Analysis is the concept of *transitional competence* which, together with the concept of *approximate system* of Nemser established the basis for Selinker's concept of *interlanguage* (IL).

Investigations about learners' errors agree on the existence of a sort of coherence regarding grammar rules of the students, who create a discourse which has its own rules and follows his own grammar, mixing elements from L1 and L2. This new model appeared in the 1970s and 1980s as an extension and continuation of Error Analysis.

Interlanguage was a concept introduced by Selinker in 1972 to refer to "a system intermediate between the mother tongue and the target language. Hence, its name: interlanguage" (as cited in Corder, 1994:23). Selinker proposed that SLA theories should not only focus on errors made by students, but also on their attempts to communicate in the target language. Unlike the previously exposed models, IL is not a theory applied to foreign language learning, but a reflection of the learning process and communicative strategies used by learners.

²⁵ "Whereas there is significant evidence that differences between the L1 and L2 are the major source of avoidance (...), there is also evidence that the opposite occurs. That is, when great similarities exist between the L1 and the L2, the learner may doubt that these similarities are real" (Gass and Selinker, 2008:128).

After the previous theories were questioned and behaviourist approaches were left aside, generative approaches became now concerned with “the development of interlanguage and the L2 initial state, hypothesizing on what the initial state of L2 acquisition could be and what is or is not carried over from the L1” (Alonso, 2002:22).

Martín Peris defines this concept as “la gramática interiorizada de una L2 que en cada momento tiene el hablante extranjero que la aprende²⁶” (2004:477). The rules of these grammars are independent of those of L1 and L2, they are provisional and changeable as the learning process progresses. Due to that, interlanguage is defined as an independent linguistic system whose structures are neither those of L1 nor L2 but, at the same time, are related to both. According to Alonso, “transfer and fossilization are the two central cognitive processes of interlanguage” (2002:50).

Regarding Corder’s theory, the reference point when acquiring a new language is the mother tongue. Then, through a series of progressive changes and restructuring²⁷, we start to create a system each time more similar to the target language. This would be the process of creating an interlanguage. That explains why Corder says that, in the earlier stages, the interlanguage would be more mother-tongue-like than in the later stages (1994). Hence, some studies argue that negative transfers would be obviously more frequent in the first stages. On contrast, some researchers such as Kellerman support an opposite view: errors as a result of negative transfers become more evident when L2 knowledge improves (as cited in Alonso, 2002).

When the L1 items that are not similar in L2 are wrongly incorporated into the interlanguage, the error appears. The long-term persistence of these non-target-like structures in the IL of non-native speakers leads to a process called *fossilization* (Selinker & Lakshmanan, 2001). *Fossilization* consists of a “stagnation, at a certain point, of interlanguage, resulting in a defective production that becomes fixed in our system.” Taking into account this idea, “an adult learner never obtains a total development in the L2”²⁸ (Alonso, 2002:56). In that sense, non-native speakers would never achieve the same competence in L2 as a native speaker. According to Gass and Selinker “it appears to be the case that fossilized or stabilized interlanguages exist

²⁶ “The internalized grammar of the L2 that the foreign language learner possesses at any given moment” [my translation].

²⁷ According to “restructuring continuum” views, the L1 is the starting point for the L2, the process of acquisition gradually replaces the L1 by the L2 (Alonso, 2002).

²⁸ In 1992 Selinker comments that L2 learners do not achieve a competence that can be compared to native speakers. Thus, he defines *fossilization* as “a cessation of interlanguage learning, often far from TL forms” (as cited in Alonso, 2002:56).

no matter what learners do in terms of further exposure to the TL” (2008:135). Therefore, although there is ample evidence for the correct parameter in L2, incorrect parameters could still persist in the grammar of a L2 learner despite his fluency.

According to Martín Peris, one of the main characteristics of interlanguage is that it is systematic:

Forma un sistema de reglas cuyas manifestaciones pueden no ser coincidentes con las aceptadas como correctas en la gramática de la lengua que poseen sus hablantes nativos. Esas manifestaciones constituyen los denominados errores, que a la luz de estos postulados se interpretan como la correcta aplicación de aquellas reglas, erróneas, sí, pero necesarias como fases del desarrollo de aprendizaje (2004:477)²⁹.

Furthermore, progress towards L2 grammatical competence is not lineal:

As learners become more proficient in a language, they are inclined to modify the linguistic information which is stored (...) the re-emergence of errors made by students and changes to their interlanguage, is known as *restructuring* (Tasseron, 2012:1).

Interlanguage theory, as the previous ones, is not absent of criticism. However, it has achieved a significant advance, focusing on all strategies and mechanisms involved in the learning process.

6. Research

To narrow the scope of this research, we have decided to focus this study on a specific grammatical category: prepositions. Although the number of English prepositions is small compared to other word classes, Sinclair affirms that “most sentences that people produce contain at least one preposition; indeed, three out of the ten most frequent words of English are prepositions: of, to, and in” (1991:5).

²⁹ “It forms a system of rules whose manifestations may not coincide with those accepted as correct in the grammar of native speakers. These manifestations are what we refer to as errors, which, considering these principles, are interpreted as the correct application of those rules - erroneous but necessary as stages in the learning process” [my translation].

Prepositions are considered dependent lexical units, they are not studied in isolation, but as part of larger syntactic structures. Depending on the word that accompanies the preposition, it behaves differently. Therefore, the same preposition can express different relations. For instance, prepositions can follow adjectives (“responsible for”), verbs (“depend on”), and nouns (“reason for”).

Bueno González conducted research in secondary school students and found that prepositions were “the word class with the highest percentage of errors, accounting for 26.56% of all errors in his corpus” (as cited in Díez Bedmar & Casas Pedrosa, 2011:204). It has been shown that prepositions continue to be a fuzzy word class regardless of learners’ proficiency level:

Contrastive analyses of English and Spanish prepositions highlight the difficulties that Spanish learners of English encounter with prepositions in the foreign language. This is not surprising considering that Spanish students make mistakes with prepositions even in their mother tongue” (Díez Bedmar & Casas Pedrosa, 2011:200).

These authors conclude in their study that the majority of errors related to an incorrect use of prepositions are due to L1 influence, in other words, they are caused by interference from the mother tongue: Spanish (2011). Hall explains that literally translating prepositions from English into the mother tongue (Spanish, in this case) usually results in errors, because English prepositions often express multiple ideas and have more than one meaning (as cited in Casas Pedrosa, 2005).

6.1. Methodology

The present research has been conducted using the Open Cambridge Learner Corpus. We got access to this corpus by the text analysis tool called Sketch Engine, to which we subscribed using the 30-day free trial twice. Through this website, we had access to a wide range of corpora in different languages, one of them is Open Cambridge Learner Corpus. This corpus contains exam scripts from more than 180.000 students from various countries. The written samples obtained for this study have been found in CEFR exams at different levels (B2, C1 and C2) by learners of English whose first language is Spanish.

As Fernández Sánchez said: “el mayor número de las interferencias cometidas por los aprendices de una segunda lengua tiene lugar cuando se les requiere que usen dicha lengua de una forma creativa”³⁰(1999:106). Due to that, we have considered this corpus the most appropriate source for my research because, in the writing part of these exams, students are required to write a free composition by choosing from a range of previously proposed topics.

Among the participants there is a wide range of ages, nationalities, genders, education levels, and number of years studying English. The only filter we have applied to the searches is the participants’ first language, which in all cases was “Spanish-European”. The reason for using groups of people with different personal backgrounds is necessary, since my objective is to check if Spanish as L1 has an impact on the acquisition of English as L2. Delimiting the subjects of investigation could threaten its results as they may be based on individual variables rather than language-based variables. This broader approach has allowed us to observe that language errors occur across all subjects regardless of their age, L2 proficiency level, or any other criteria.

To continue, we focus the second part of this study on sociological factors. Therefore, apart from identifying the errors, we also take into account the performer’s proficiency level, not based on the level of the exam they took, but on the level of his performance assessed after the exam as we consider it a more realistic approach. Using this data, we include a quantitative analysis to study the presence of errors in relation to the performer’s proficiency level to explore whether the level of the performer influences, or not, the quantity of errors caused by negative transfer.

6.2. Classification of errors

As it was previously mentioned, English prepositions often express more than one idea and have multiple meanings. Therefore, it is not easy to establish a fixed classification of English prepositions. For this reason, the errors found in the corpus are classified not by the prepositions themselves, but rather by their syntactic role within the specific context.

In this way and based on Eastwood’s classification in his work *Oxford Guide to English Grammar*, the errors related to the incorrect use of prepositions have been divided into different groups: place prepositions, time prepositions and another more ambiguous group that includes patterns in which the use of prepositions depends on how they combine with other words:

³⁰ Most of the interferences made by second language learners occur when they are required to use the language in a creative way [my translation].

adjectives, nouns and verbs. We have organized the errors using tables which include: the negative transfer taken from the corpus shown in context and using the performer’s exact words (the incorrect preposition is highlighted in bold); the performer’s assessed proficiency level according to the CEFR and based on their performance after the exam³¹; the correct form that should have been used; and an explanation for the error from the point of view of language transfer.

6.2.1. Place prepositions³²

Table 1: Errors regarding place prepositions

Negative transfer taken from the corpus	CEFR level student performance	Correct form	Explanation
1. They can go to school with the bike , if they must go to a place which is far away.	B1	By + noun for means of transport	In Spanish, the preposition “con”, equivalent to “with” in English, is used with means of transport (“voy con el coche/bici”).
2. Nowadays, reality shows, where people are filmed going about their real lives, are becoming increasingly popular in television .	C1	On television	In Spanish, the expression “en (la) televisión”, uses the preposition “en” which is often translated as “in” into English.
3. Only when students are proximum to their degree in the university they can choose what they want to study.	B2	At university	In Spanish, for the expression “en la universidad”, we use the preposition “en” which is directly translated as “in” into English.
4. Since that horrible day I don't turn round when I heard my name in the street because it could be another man looking for his little daughter Raquel.	B2	On the street	In Spanish, we use the preposition “en” for the expression “en la calle”, preposition which is translated as “in” into English.

³¹ It is important to highlight that this corpus collects exams from levels B2 to C2, B1 exams are not included. However, B1 is used as a level to classify the performance of the student measured after the exam if they do not achieve a superior level. Due to that, the number of students whose performance belongs to B1 level is lower.

³² The majority of errors in this category are related to the overuse of the preposition “in” in cases in which the correct preposition is “on” or “at” (see examples 2,3,4). The reason, as Díez Bedmar and Casas Pedrosa, explain, is that in Spanish there is only one preposition (“en”) which conveys the spatial meanings of at least three English ones (at, by and on) (2011).

6.2.2. Time prepositions³³

Table 2: Errors regarding time prepositions

Negative transfer taken from the corpus	CEFR level student performance	Correct form	Explanation
5. Can build a disco or a pub, in which young people can have a nice time in the weekends .	B2	At weekends	In Spanish we use the preposition “en” for general time periods, and its equivalent in English is “in”.
6. Both of us were quite young in that time but I still figure out her face.	C1	At that time	In Spanish, we say “en ese momento” or “en ese entonces”, in both cases the preposition “en” is translated as “in” into English.
7. A few day ago I noticed something that has been coming up from years but that we probably did not realised.	C1	for + length of time: to say how long something has continued or when it started	In Spanish, we use the preposition “desde”, often translated into English as “from”, to indicate when a time period began.
8. First of all, the beauty is something that has been in our culture since ages .	B2	For + length of time	In Spanish, we use the preposition “desde” for expressions as “desde hace años”, which can be translated into English as “since”.
9. Friday and Sunday afternoons I looked after two children from six to eight	B2	On + day of the week followed by a part of the day	In Spanish, a preposition is not required in expressions referring to days of the week.

³³ In this section, we find again an incorrect overuse of the preposition “in” (see examples 5,6). Furthermore, there are errors caused by the confusion between “since” and “for” (see example 8), as the Spanish equivalent prepositions, “desde” and “por” respectively, are used differently in many cases. Moreover, there is a case (see example 9) in which the preposition is omitted due to Spanish interference.

6.2.3. Other patterns

6.2.3.1. Prepositional verbs³⁴

Table 3: Errors regarding prepositional verbs

Negative transfer taken from the corpus	CEFR level student performance	Correct form	Explanation
10. When they got up, they had already arrived to Australia!	B1	Arrive in (for larger locations)	In Spanish the verb “llegar” (to arrive) collocates with the preposition “a”, which is often translated as “to” into English.
11. When we arrived to our destination, we noticed that our baggage was lost.	B1	Arrive at (for specific places)	In Spanish the verb “llegar” (to arrive) collocates with the preposition “a”, which is often translated as “to” into English.
12. The housework is still considered as a woman task, even if the woman works and insists in succeeding in her career.	C2	Insist on	In Spanish, the verb “insistir” collocates with the preposition “en”, which learners may incorrectly translate as “in” into English.
13. Think about it as one lesson more as if the examiner was not there and concentrate in driving and doing what you are asked to.	B2	Concentrate on	In Spanish, the verb “concentrarse” collocates with the preposition “en”, whose equivalent in English is “in”.
14. To conclude, I hope my opinion will influence in a positive way local government decisions.	C1	Influence on	In Spanish, the verb “influir” is followed by the preposition “en”, often translated into English as “in”.
15. The English lessons were very useful despite being mostly focus in grammar.	B2	Focus on	In Spanish, the verbs “enfocarse” or “centrarse” are followed by the preposition “en”, equivalent to the English preposition “in”.
16. It could be interesting the idea of making several groups, depending of the level of the students.	B2	Depend on	In Spanish, the verb “depender” collocates with the preposition “de”, equivalent to the English preposition “of”.

³⁴ In this group, there is also a noticeable overuse of the preposition “in” in cases in which the correct one is another one, mainly “on” (see examples 12,13,14,15).

17. We are thinking in amplifying the experience.	B2	Think about/of	In Spanish, the verb “pensar” collocates with the preposition “en”, often translated as “in” into English.
18. He also declares that he dreams with coming back Europe to become a director.	C1	Dream of/about	In Spanish, we say “soñar con algo”, this preposition is often translated as “with” into English.

6.2.3.2. Verb + object + preposition

Table 4: Errors regarding “verb + object + preposition” pattern

Negative transfer taken from the corpus	CEFR level student performance	Correct form	Explanation
19. Firstly, it is vital to divide the park in different areas so that the elder people do not get disturbed by the children who go there to play and have fun.	C1	divide something into something	In Spanish, the verb “dividir” collocates with the preposition “en” (<i>dividir una tarta en porciones</i>). The equivalent preposition in English is “in”.
20. I'm so grateful because you have congratulated me for getting the first prize.	B2	congratulate someone on something	In Spanish, we use the verb “felicitar” accompanied by the preposition “por” to indicate the reason for the congratulations. The equivalent preposition in English is “for”.
21. This attitude prevents them of understanding the point of view of other countries.	C2	prevent someone from something	In Spanish, we use the preposition “de” in the expression “prevenir a alguien de algo”, that is often translated into English as “of”.
22. This means replacing some traffic lights by roundabouts.	C2	replace something with something	In Spanish, the verb “reemplazar” collocates with the preposition “por”, equivalent to the English preposition “by”.

23. Another advantage about living with a family is that you won't spend money in using the washing machines.	C1	spend something on something	In Spanish, the expression “gastar dinero en algo” collocates with the preposition “en”, equivalent to the English preposition “in”.
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6.2.3.3. Verb + added preposition³⁵

Table 5: Errors regarding “verb + added preposition” pattern

Negative transfer taken from the corpus	CEFR level student performance	Correct form	Explanation
24. And I have to enter in the house to look for my lighter.	B2	Enter (without preposition)	In Spanish, the verb “entrar” is always accompanied by a preposition, normally “en”, equivalent to the English preposition “in”.
25. Firstly I tried to phone to my sister but the line was engaged.	B1	Phone (without preposition)	In Spanish, the verb “llamar” (when referring to calling someone by telephone), is accompanied by the preposition “a”, equivalent to the English preposition “to”.
26. You might learn some relaxations practises. It would help to you.	B1	Help (with preposition)	In Spanish, the verb “ayudar” is accompanied with the preposition “a”, equivalent to the English preposition “to”.

³⁵ In this section, errors caused by an unnecessary use of a preposition when a verb does not require it are collected.

6.2.3.4. Adjective + preposition

Table 6: Errors regarding “adjective + preposition” pattern

Negative transfer taken from the corpus	CEFR level student performance	Correct form	Explanation
27. That street was crowded of people and cars.	B2	Crowded with	In Spanish, the expression “lleno de” or “repleto de” collocates with the preposition “de”, equivalent to the English preposition “of”.
28. The Excel Academy it's good in the Speaking Skills, in its special courses and also has a good teaching staff.	B2	Good at	The Spanish expression “ser bueno en algo” collocates with the preposition “en”, equivalent to the English preposition “in”.
29. Now that you know the causes of the strike, stop worrying about your sister who, I know, is married with a black man here in Spain.	B2	Married to	In Spanish, the adjective “casado” collocates with the preposition “con”, often translated as “with” into English.
30. They should take into account the fact that they are responsible of the education of future members of a society.	C2	Responsible for	In Spanish the adjective “responsable” collocates with the preposition “de”, which is often translated as “of” into English.
31. There's nothing to do and I was worried for a stupid thing.	B2	Worried about	In Spanish, the adjective “preocupado” collocates with the preposition “por”, equivalent to the English preposition “for”.

6.2.3.5. Noun + preposition

Table 7: Errors regarding “noun + preposition” pattern

Negative transfer taken from the corpus	CEFR level student performance	Correct form	Explanation
32. But apart from the need of the society approval, there are more advantages.	C1	Need for	In Spanish, the noun “necesidad” collocates with the preposition “de”, its equivalent in English is “of”.
33. The reason of this letter is because I'd like to know something about the activities of your club.	B2	Reason for	In Spanish, the preposition “de” collocates with this noun: “la razón de...”. The equivalent preposition in English is “of”.
34. Thus, I would be very grateful if you would send me a booklet or a bulletin of information including clear explanations of the following points.	B2	Explanation for	In Spanish, the noun “explicación” collocates with the preposition “de”, its equivalent in English is “en”.

6.3. Results

The results of this study indicate, first, that errors in the use of prepositions due to language transfers from Spanish as L1 to English as L2 do exist. Thirty-four examples taken from written productions of students whose first language is European Spanish were collected to illustrate the existence of such errors. In all these cases, prepositions are used incorrectly due to interference from L1 Spanish. Secondly, the study reveals that the most frequently misused preposition is “in”, with 37.14% of the total errors. In most cases, the reason for the incorrect use of the preposition occurs when it replaces “on”³⁶. The second most frequently misused preposition is “of”, with the 20% of the total errors. In the majority of cases, it has wrongly replaced the preposition “for”.

³⁶ The reason for this confusion was given above: it exists only one spatial preposition in Spanish (“en”) which is equivalent to two different spatial prepositions in English “in” and “on”.

The second objective of this study was to determine whether language transfer errors were more recurring in certain groups depending on their English level according to the CEFR parameters. To investigate this, a quantitative analysis based on the thirty-four examples collected in the tables above was conducted. The results are the following:

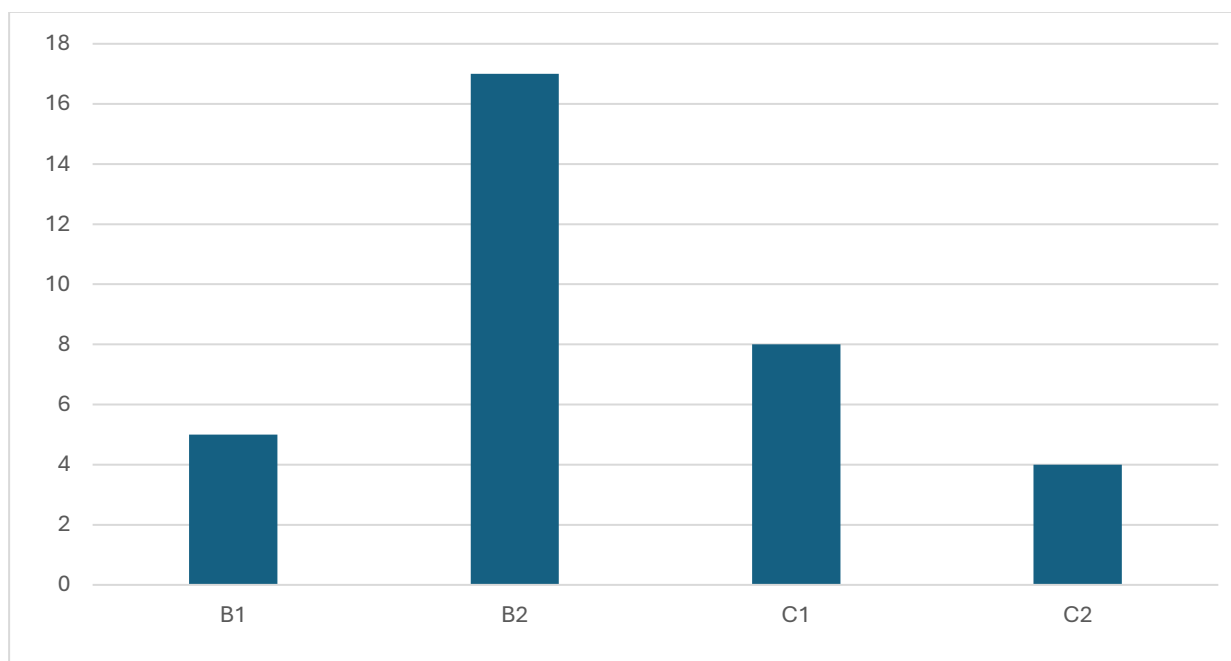
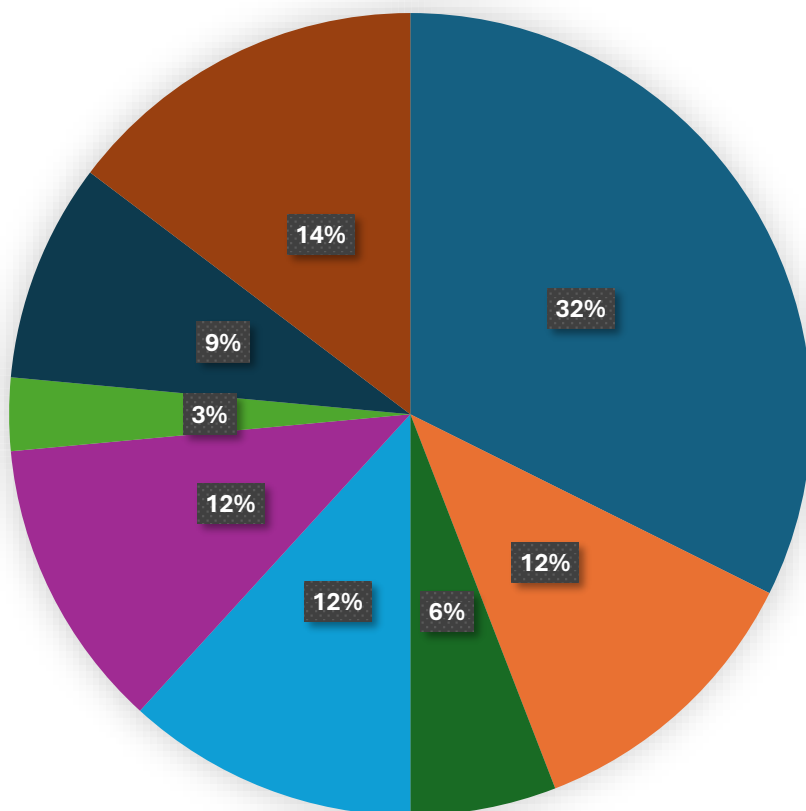


Figure 1: Number of errors depending on the performer CEFR level

Therefore, half of the errors (50 %) are found in students whose performance level is B2. Then, the 23.53% of errors are caused by performers whose level is C1. Finally, B1 and C2 level performers have 14.71% and 11.76% respectively.

However, these conclusions are too limited to make broad generalizations, as they are based on isolated examples from specific learners. Therefore, and to deepen the study, we find it necessary to inquire into the relation between the recurrence of errors and the learner level according to CEFR. To achieve this, we examined whether the specific error in each concrete example was also present at other proficiency levels beyond the one initially indicated in the tables above. The conclusions drawn are the following:



- All levels
- Disappear from C1 onwards
- Disappear from C2 onwards
- Only B2
- All levels (except for B1)
- All levels (except for B1 because it is not used)
- Only B2 (in B1 not even the correct form is used)
- Only C1 and /or C2

Figure 2: Recurrence of errors on the different CEFR levels

Most of the errors (32.35%) appear across all different levels (B1, B2, C1 and C2), without distinction. Additionally, 11.76% of these errors no longer appear in C1 and C2 level, while 5,88% of errors disappear from C2 level onwards. It should be noted that 20.59% of the total errors occur exclusively in B2-level students³⁷, almost half of these errors are not present, even in the correct form, among B1-level learners. It is also significant to highlight that 11.76% of the total number of errors occur in all levels except for B1 and, among these, a quarter of them are not found at all (not even in their correct form) in B1-level productions³⁸. Nevertheless, as it was previously explained, this corpus does not collect data from B1 exam scripts, so the number of B1-level performers is significantly lower in comparison to the remaining levels. Hence, the scope of this corpus is insufficient to confirm whether the lower percentage of errors made by B1-level learners is directly related to a true reduction in error production. Broader and more varied data is needed to prove this hypothesis. Finally, 14.71% of the total errors occur only in C1 and/or C2 level students³⁹.

On the one hand, it is worth noting that, based on the data collected from this corpus and focusing on levels B2, C1 and C2, some of the errors (17.65%) tends to disappear as learner level rises: a significant decrease in errors is observed from B2 onwards. There is also a drop, although it is not as significant as the previous one, from C1 to C2 level. It seems there is a certain degree of improvement when the L2 level increases. On the other hand, there is also a significant quantity from the total of errors that appear in isolated levels without a stable explanation. The main conclusion, based on the figures obtained using the Cambridge Learner Corpus as a reference, is that most prepositional errors caused by negative transfers from Spanish to English occur across all proficiency levels. According to this data, the frequency of negative transfers appears to be independent of student progress; in other words, there is no clear correlation between language level and the occurrence of such errors. Nevertheless, it would be necessary to conduct a broader study with a larger sample size in order to confirm this hypothesis, as we are conscious of the limited scope of examples used in this research.

³⁷ For instance, the incorrect addition of the preposition “in” to the verb “enter” only occurs in B2 level performers.

³⁸ An example is the incorrect collocation “responsible of”.

³⁹ For example, the incorrect verbal construction “prevent someone of something” only occurs in C2 level performers.

7. Teaching Proposal

The results of my study conclude that most prepositional errors caused by language transfer occur in different learners, regardless of their English proficiency level. The main cause is likely that prepositions are not taught effectively from the earliest levels. Since the foundation is not solid, errors tend to persist across levels. It is essential to consider how prepositions are introduced from the lower levels to ensure that learners build a strong foundation and gradually overcome these mistakes over time. For this reason, we present a teaching proposal centred around prepositions, applying the approach we consider most appropriate based on the findings of this research.

There are numerous current studies about how to teach prepositions to learners of English as L2 and in all of them researchers conclude that prepositions should not be taught using long lists to memorize how they collocate with verbs, adjectives or nouns, but rather by providing the context in which they are used (Casas Pedrosa, 2005). Furthermore, in the longitudinal study conducted by Díez Bedmar and Casas Pedrosa, both authors concluded that:

Prepositions should not be taught as isolated items but in meaningful contexts. As we are in favour of the explicit teaching of prepositions, we would suggest that language awareness exercises and remedial work focus on the phrase level rather than on the word level. Many mistakes could be avoided if students noticed that particular prepositions are often imposed by the elements which precede or follow them (2011:214).

Based on these affirmations, we present the teaching unit focused on prepositions described above. The title is “A Journey Through Prepositions”. It is designed for B1-level students, which is equivalent to secondary school students, and is divided into four fifty-minutes-lessons.

Apart from learning the correct use of prepositions in different contexts depending on how they collocate with other words, another objective of this unit is to make the students feel confident when using prepositions in creative writing activities. It has been tested that there is an underuse of patterns involving prepositions by Spanish learners in comparison to native English speakers, who use a wider range of prepositions, the main reason seems to be the fear of making a mistake (Diez Bedmar & Casas Pedrosa, 2011).

As the objective is for students to learn prepositions in context and not as isolated words, this unit pays special attention to how they collocate with other words: the first lesson is focused on place and time prepositions, the second one concentrates on prepositional verbs, and the third one is centred around collocations including nouns and adjectives. At the end, there is a final lesson which includes a revision of all contents and a final test.

The methodology chosen for this teaching unit is focused on cooperative learning, most of the activities use team dynamics and encourage group work, as well as gamification, learning through games such as “bingo” or “memory” to engage the students and achieve an active and participatory approach. Furthermore, this unit includes activities that involve all the different skills: listening, writing, speaking and reading, in order to ensure a diverse and balanced content. The proposed method for final assessment is continuous assessment, taking into account the student’s participation and involvement in the proposed activities, their ability to improve and progress throughout the different lessons, and the result of the final test. We expose the planning with explanations for each activity in the table below.

	CONTENTS	OBJECTIVES	ACTIVITIES
Lesson 1	Place and time prepositions: <i>-at/ on/ in</i> <i>-for/since</i> <i>-by</i>	-Learn the appropriate preposition for each place/time expression. -Use these expressions correctly and include them naturally in the speech.	- Fill-in-the-gaps exercise (see Appendix 10.1.): each student completes the paper individually. Afterwards, the exercises are corrected as a group. - Role play : in pairs, students must perform a situation in front of the class for 3-4 minutes. Each student chooses two random cards: one that provides a context for the conversation and other that includes three place/time expressions they must include naturally in the conversation (see Appendix 10.2.).

Lesson 2	Prepositional verbs: <i>depend on, consist of, benefit from, believe in</i> , etc.	<p>-Learn what prepositional verbs are and how they collocate with the correct preposition.</p> <p>-Learn how to include prepositional verbs in written sentences.</p>	<p>- Memory Game: For this game, flashcards which include names of verbs and prepositions separately are needed (see Appendix 10.3.). In groups of 3-4 people, students have to flip the flashcards and try to match verbs with the correct prepositions in order to build a prepositional verb.</p> <p>- Creating sentences: For this activity, an interactive whiteboard to project in front of the class is needed, as well as a tablet or computer per student or team. It is a team game about creating sentences using the online platform <i>Padlet</i>. This platform provides a big digital blackboard to which students, besides the teacher, can have access individually through a QR code. The class must be divided into teams of 4-5 students. The teacher displays a verb in the board, and each team, writing from its own devices, must form as many grammatical sentences as possible using the corresponding preposition in 3 minutes time. The team with the most correct sentences will win.</p>
Lesson 3	Grammatical constructions: -Nouns + prepositions: <i>reason for, thanks to</i> , etc.	<p>-Learn common noun + prepositions/ adjectives + prepositions patterns.</p> <p>-Apply these patterns in writing compositions</p>	<p>-Kahoot Game: For this activity, an interactive whiteboard to project the online platform Kahoot in front of the class is needed, as well as a device for each student or team. The class is divided into 3 different teams. They</p>

	<p>-Adjectives + prepositions: <i>responsible for, crowded with, etc.</i></p>		<p>must answer different questions concerning <i>noun + preposition</i> and <i>adjective + preposition</i> collocations: Examples of possible questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>The adjective “married” collocates with “with”: True or False?</i> • <i>Fill-in-the-gap: I don’t know the reason --- his anger.</i> • <i>Write a sentence using the prepositional verb “arrive at”.</i> <p>The team with the highest score wins.</p> <p>-Mini Project: Students are told to write a 120-150 words creative story that must include at least 5 <i>noun + preposition</i>, or <i>adjective + preposition</i> patterns covered in class. Later, they must read it in front of their classmates and work together to correct any possible mistakes.</p>
Lesson 4	Revision and final test.	- Reinforce knowledge of all types of prepositional patterns and assess students’ understanding.	-Bingo Game: Each student receives a bingo card with six random prepositions like the ones shown in Appendix 10.4. The teacher randomly draws one paper (each one containing a sentence in which a preposition is missing) as the ones in Appendix 10.5. Students must cover on their bingo cards the correct preposition which collocates with the word, if they have

			<p>it. The student who first completes his bingo card wins, making sure his answers are correct.</p> <p>- Written test: To finalize, a 25-minutes written text including some multiple-choice and fill-in the-gaps activities, as well as a creative part of sentences creation.</p>
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8. Conclusion

Throughout this study, the concept of *language transfer* has been discussed in depth. We began with an understanding of how a second language is acquired focusing on the most rewarded theories in the SLA field. Subsequently, we focus on the role that the mother tongue plays in this acquisition process taking into account the views of such important linguists as Chomsky or Corder. Then, we delved into the concept of *language transfer* and its various types, with particular emphasis on negative transfer, also referred to as *interference*, which leads to errors in the use of the target language as a result of the influence of the learner's mother tongue. To conclude the theoretical framework, it was deemed necessary to address the concept of *error*, which has played a crucial role in the process of second language acquisition and has given rise to three main theoretical approaches, each offering a different perspective on how learner errors must be understood and treated.

In the research section, we returned to the main objective of this study – which was to examine the extent to which the mother tongue can negatively influence second language acquisition through language transfers- the findings based on the data collected in the corpus confirm that Spanish as L1 does, in fact, significantly influence learners of English as L2. Specifically, numerous and varied examples were identified in which English prepositions were used incorrectly due to interference from Spanish, thereby supporting our initial hypothesis.

Moreover, although the data show that some of these interferences tend to decrease as learners' proficiency in the target language increases, a significant number of them persist regardless of the learner's level. This highlights the need to reconsider how prepositions are taught to Spanish students, emphasizing an approach that promotes learning them as part of

word combinations or collocations, rather than as isolated units, as is often the case in traditional teaching methods. For this reason, a teaching unit was proposed including activities that integrate all language skills practice and focus on cooperative learning and gamification.

It would be worthwhile, for the purpose of continuing this research, to conduct a longitudinal follow-up on the performance of the English learners who made these prepositional errors. The objective would be to determine whether such errors are solved through the practice facilitated by the proposed teaching unit, or whether, conversely, the errors persist despite having been explicitly addressed. Should the latter occur, it would provide support to the hypothesis conducted by scholars such as Gass and Selinker, who argue for the existence of possible stabilized interlanguages that resist change, even with continued exposure to the target language (2008). Consequently, it will provide empirical evidence for the widely discussed phenomenon of *fossilization*.

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10. Appendix

10.1. Fill-in-the-gaps



Prepositions of Place & Time

Complete the sentences using the correct preposition.

1. Let's meet _____ the bus stop.
2. She was born _____ 2012.
3. I go to university _____ train.
4. I have English class _____ Monday.
5. I rarely go to the beach _____ weekends.
6. Our flight is _____ midnight.
7. I usually have lunch _____ 3 p.m.
8. My cousin see cartoons _____ television.
9. We arrived _____ Zurich yesterday.
10. See you _____ the morning.
11. I have been waiting for you _____ 3 p.m.
12. I have been waiting for you _____ 3 hours.
13. The bill must be paid _____ the end of the month.
14. There are lots of people boating _____ the river.
15. I have to leave _____ five minutes time.
16. I was living in Morocco _____ that time.

10.2. Role Play

CONVERSATION CARDS

Context:
You meet your
friend
suddenly at
the
supermarket

Context:
Your teacher
has called
you to her
office

Context:
You have
failed an
exam and
have to tell
your mother

You must use:
-by car
-since 2010
-at midnight

You must use:
-at the station
-for two
months
-on TV

You must use:
-by next week
-on the floor
-at Christmas

10.3. Memory Game

Prepositional verbs Memory Game

insist	on
congratulate	for
smile	at
dream	of
benefit	from
dedicate	to
hear	about



Prepositional verbs

Memory Game

consist	of
think	about
depend	on
dream	with
divide	into
prevent	from
replace	with



Prepositional verbs

Memory Game

focus	on
apply	for
translate	into
glance	at
suffer	from
complain	about
run	into



10.4. Bingo Game

PREPOSITIONS

Bingo

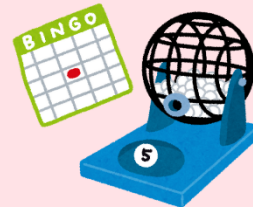
INTO	FOR	IN
WITH	OF	ON



PREPOSITIONS

Bingo

FOR	TO	BY
ON	AT	SINCE



PREPOSITIONS

Bingo

UNDER	FROM	OF
BETWEEN	SINCE	BY



PREPOSITIONS

Bingo

WITHOUT	IN	FROM
ABOUT	BETWEEN	AT



PREPOSITIONS



BINGO CARDS



He died ___ a heart attack
last year.

Laura apologized ___ being
late to the party.

Someone is knocking ___ the
door

It was hard to choose ___
staying home and going out.

We travelled to the coast ___
car

You should take advantage
___ this opportunity.

I always meet my family ___
Christmas.

I haven't spoken to her ___
March.