

# **ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN 21ST CENTURY CLASSROOMS: CHALLENGES AND EXPECTATIONS**

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# **Mother-Tongue Interference in Spanish-Speaking English Language Learners' Interlanguage**

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Interlanguage, or learner language, is the type of language produced by second-language learners who are in the process of learning a language. In this process, learners' errors are caused by such phenomena as borrowing patterns from the mother tongue, extending patterns from the target language, and expressing meanings using the vocabulary and syntax which are already known (Richards, Platt, & Platt, 1992).

This article is a practical reference guide that explains how Spanish-speaking English language learners make errors in their interlanguage by borrowing patterns from their mother tongue, a process referred to as "negative transfer" or "interference" by a number of researchers (James, 1980; Nobel, 1982; Swan & Smith, 1987; Brown, 2001; Parker & Riley, 1994; Horwitz, 2008). The author hopes that this guide will help teachers of Spanish-speaking English language learners anticipate the characteristic errors potentially made by this particular student population and understand how these errors arise. This information has practical pedagogical value, about which Parker and Riley (1994) commented that

“the influence of L1 on L2 acquisition cannot be ignored” (p. 225), and Fillmore and Snow (2000) noted that “understanding the variety of structures that different languages and dialects use to show meaning, including grammatical meaning such as plurality or past tense, can help teachers see the errors of their students who are learning English” (p. 16).

Typical interference errors are exemplified and explained in the following areas: (1) articles, (2) gender, (3) number, (4) personal pronouns, (5) relative pronouns, (6) adjectives, (7) prepositions, (8) possessives, (9) question formation, (10) negation, (11) verb tenses, (12) passive voice, (13) word order, and (14) false cognates. The examples illustrating these interference-induced errors are from the author’s own observations as well as those shared by bilingual education teachers enrolled in his graduate-level course in second-language acquisition during the past several years at Texas Woman’s University. Examples containing interference errors are italicized, and below them are their correct forms and explanations for the negative transfer, illustrated by a Spanish sentence whose structure influences the interlanguage example.

### 1. Articles

*I will read my book and the yours also.*

I will read my book and yours also.

In Spanish the definite article (el, la) is used with possessive pronouns: Voy a leer mi libro y el tuyo también.

*Our uncle is doctor.*

Our uncle is a doctor.

In Spanish the indefinite article (un, uno, una) is not used before nouns describing profession, occupation or social status: *Nuestro tío es médico.*

*Juan is looking for one house for his parents.*

Juan is looking for a house for his parents.

No distinction is made between the indefinite article (un, uno, una) and the number one (uno) in Spanish: *Juan está buscando una casa para sus padres.*

*Can you recommend ones good books?*

Can you recommend some good books?

The plural form (unos, unas) of the Spanish indefinite article (uno, una) means "some": *¿Puede recomendar unos buenos libros?*

## 2. Gender

*What bright moon! Look at her!*

What bright moon! Look at it!

Grammatical gender is assigned to nouns in Spanish, in which the moon (la luna) is feminine: *¡Qué luna más brillante! ¡Mírala!*

## 3. Number

*We love hers news friends.*

We love her new friends.

In Spanish, the plural marker applies not only to nouns, but also to articles, adjectives, and possessive adjectives: Queremos a sus nuevos amigos.

*The other childs got lost.*

The other children got lost.

There exist no irregular plural nouns in Spanish.

*Roberto needs a new trouser.*

Roberto needs a new pair of trousers.

English words describing such “symmetrical” things as trousers and pajamas tend to be singular in Spanish: Roberto necesita un nuevo pantalón.

*I owe him two hundreds dollars.*

I owe him two hundred dollars.

The word for two hundred in Spanish (doscientos) ends with a plural marker: Le debo a él doscientos dólares.

#### 4. Personal pronouns

*Alberto is not from Mexico. Is from Cuba.*

Alberto is not from Mexico. He's from Cuba.

Subject pronouns are frequently dropped in Spanish, which is a “pro-drop” language: Alberto no es de México. Es de Cuba.

*Are many sick students in class today.*

There are many sick students in class today.

Spanish does not have the equivalent for the English surrogate subject “There” found in existential sentences like “There is hope” and “There were many people at the party.”

According to Butt and Benjamin (2000), “In Spanish such sentences usually involve the special verb *haber* (present indicative *hay*), which means ‘there is/are’” (p. 407): *Hay muchos estudiantes enfermos en la clase hoy.*

## 5. Relative pronouns

*The teacher which spoke Spanish left our school.*

The teacher who spoke Spanish left our school.

*The song who was played was romantic.*

The song which was played was romantic.

No distinction is made between personal and non-personal relative pronouns in Spanish, as Butt and Benjamin (2000) noted, “Que is by far the most frequent relative pronoun and may be used in the majority of cases to translate the English relative pronouns ‘who’, ‘whom’, ‘which’ or ‘that’” (p. 495).

## 6. Adjectives

*He found two shirts of different colors and bought the blue.*

He found two shirts of different colors and bought the blue one.

An adjective in Spanish can act as a noun after the definite article: *El encontró dos camisas de diferentes colores y compró la azul.*

*My father is more rich than my uncle, but my grandfather is the most rich.*

My father is richer than my uncle, but my grandfather is the richest.

Comparative and superlative forms of Spanish adjectives are consistently constructed with “más” and “el más,” which are the equivalents of “more” and “most”: Mi padre es más rico que mi tío, pero mi abuelo es el más rico de todos.

*Look at these beautiful flowers!*

Look at these beautiful flowers!

In Spanish, adjectives agree with nouns that they modify:  
¡Mira estas lindas flores!

*Everyone was boring with the principal's speech.*

Everyone was bored with the principal's speech.

The Spanish adjective “aburrido” means both “boring” and “bored”: Todos estaban aburridos con el discurso del director.

## 7. Prepositions

*Who assassinated to Abraham Lincoln?*

Who assassinated Abraham Lincoln?

In Spanish, the personal preposition “a” is used after a transitive verb whose direct object is human: ¿Quién asesinó a Abraham Lincoln?

*For what did they come?*

What did they come for?

Prepositions cannot occur at the end of a sentence in Spanish: ¿Para qué vinieron?

*After to eat breakfast, we go to school.*

After eating breakfast, we go to school.

An infinitive verb can follow a preposition in Spanish:  
Después de comer el desayuno, vamos a la escuela.

*My friend and I talk by the phone all the time.*

My friend and I talk on the phone all the time.

“By the phone” is the English rendition of “por teléfono”:  
Mi amigo y yo hablamos por teléfono todo el tiempo.

*The tourists finally arrived to Madrid.*

The tourists finally arrived Madrid.

“To Madrid” is the English rendition of “a Madrid”: Los  
turistas finalmente llegaron a Madrid.

## 8. Possessives

*Lisa washes the hair twice a week.*

Lisa washes her hair twice a week.

In Spanish, the definite article “el” --not the possessive  
adjective “su”-- is used in this context: Lisa se lava el pelo  
dos veces por semana.

*Please show us the house of Mary.*

Please show us Mary’s house.

The Spanish “of-phrase” is used instead of the English  
“possessive case”: ¡Muéstrenos la casa de Mary, por favor!

## 9. Question formation

*Has seen Mary the movie?*



Has Mary seen the movie?

Spanish word order is used: ¿Ha visto Mary la película?

*When John left?*

*John left when?*

*John, when left?*

When did John leave?

In Spanish, word order is not fixed for questions, and there are no counterparts for the question words “do,” “does,” and “did.”

## 10. Negation

*Roberto not found his book.*

Roberto did not find his book.

There are no Spanish equivalents for “do not,” “does not,” and “did not” which express a verb in the negative. In Spanish, the negative particle “no” is put in front of the verb phrase, regardless of tenses or persons: Roberto no encontró su libro.

*He said he did not see nobody.*

He said he did not see anybody.

Double negation is standard in Spanish: Dijo que no vio a nadie. This syntactical feature makes it difficult for Spanish speakers to differentiate the three English categories of assertive forms such as “some” and “somebody,” non-assertive forms such as “any” and “anybody,” and negative forms such as “no” and “none” (Coe, 1987).

## 11. Verb tenses

*Look, it snows!*

Look, it's snowing!

In Spanish, the simple present tense is frequently used to express an action that is taking place at the moment of speaking. Thus, "Nieva" means both "It snows" and "It is snowing."

*We see each other tomorrow.*

We will see each other tomorrow.

In Spanish, the simple present tense is often used for a future action: Nos vemos mañana.

*I live here since 1995.*

I have lived here since 1995.

In Spanish, the simple present tense can express an action that began in the past but continues to the moment of speaking: Vivo aquí desde 1992.

*Come you this evening to eat with us!*

Come this evening to eat with us!

In Spanish, a sentence in the imperative mood can have an expressed subject: ¡Venga usted esta noche a cenar con nosotros!

## 12. Passive voice

*Spanish speaks itself here.*

Spanish is spoken here.

“Spanish speaks itself here” is the English rendition of “Se habla español aquí,” a syntactical construction used in preference to a passive sentence without the agent phrase. An agent phrase is a prepositional phrase beginning with “by” in English and “por” in Spanish, as in “Spanish is spoken here by the people” and “Español es hablado aquí por la gente.” According to Nobel (1982), “passive sentences which lack the agent are not used often in Spanish” (p. 233). Nobel also noted that a special construction called the “se-passive” is used instead, and that this construction has no counterpart in English.

## 13. Word order

*Arrived very late the teacher this morning.*  
*This morning arrived very late the teacher.*  
*The teacher arrived this morning very late.*  
 The teacher arrived very late this morning.

Word order is much freer in Spanish than it is in English. According to Coe (1987), “The freer word order allows words that are emphasized to be placed last” (p.79). The three interlanguage sentences listed above reflect this particular feature of Spanish, causing errors in English.

*Often they have given to the church.*  
*They often have given to the church.*  
 They have often given to the church.

In Spanish, adverbs of frequency have several possible positions in the sentence, but not the typical central position as in English.

*Juan belongs to the Club of Soccer of Dallas.*

Juan belongs to the Dallas Soccer Club.

In Spanish, head nouns are typically “post-modified,” in opposition to English: Juan pertenece al Club de Soccer de Dallas.

*John sent to Roberto a gift.*

John sent a gift to Roberto.

John sent Roberto a gift.

In Spanish, an indirect object must have a preposition such as “a,” and the direct object and indirect object can go in either order. The English two-object structure without a preposition (John sent Roberto a gift) is unfamiliar to Spanish speakers and they may avoid it (Coe, 1987).

*Felipe took to school his favorite books.*

John took his favorite books to school.

In Spanish, a preposition phrase is regularly put in front of a direct object: Felipe llevó a la escuela sus libros favoritos.

*Our teacher speaks very well English and Spanish.*

Our teacher speaks English and Spanish very well.

In Spanish, an adverbial phrase is regularly put in front of a direct object: Nuestra maestra habla muy bien inglés y español.

#### 14. False cognates

Spanish originates from Latin; therefore, its vocabularies correspond with the Latin-derived side of the English

language (Coe, 1987). These corresponding vocabularies are known as cognates. As Crandall, Dias, Gingras, and Harris (1981) warned, "Cognates can be both a blessing and a curse for the teachers and learners of a second language" (p. 49). Indeed, while these thousands of cognates can help Spanish-speaking English language learners accelerate their acquisition of English vocabulary, some of them are "false friends" and deserve to be pointed out for the benefit of the learners. Examples of interference errors due to false cognates are given below.

*Every child should assist to school.*

Every child should attend school.

In Spanish, "asistir a la escuela" means "to attend school."

*Take me to a library. I need to buy some books there.*

Take me to a bookstore. I need to buy some books there.

In Spanish, "librería" means "bookstore."

*Mrs. Gonzalez was a professor in a high school in South America.*

Mrs. Gonzalez was a high-school teacher in South America.

In many Spanish-speaking countries, "profesor" means "teacher" of any school, from elementary school to university.

*My friend was constipated. He took a Comtrex tablet and felt better.*

My friend had a head cold. He took a Comtrex tablet and felt better.

The Spanish adjective “constipado” means “suffering from a cold” and has nothing to do with difficult evacuation of the bowels.

*Our instructor can speak several idioms.*

Our instructor can speak several languages.

The Spanish noun “idioma” means “language.”

*After a long vacation, it's hard to regress to school.*

After a long vacation, it's hard to return to school.

The Spanish verb “regresar” means “return.”

In addition to the previously-mentioned supporting comments by Parker and Riley (1994) and Fillmore and Snow (2000) on the benefits of teachers' ability to anticipate the characteristic interference-induced errors made by English language learners, the author believes that knowing the reasoning behind certain errors should be part of the teacher's role as monitor and assessor of the learner's output. As James (1980) eloquently put it, “It is on the basis of such diagnostic knowledge that the teacher organizes feedback to the learner and remedial work. Even the learner should know why he has committed errors if he is to self-monitor and avoid these same errors in the future” (p. 148).

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