THE ROLE OF TRANSFER IN ITALIAN HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS’ WRITTEN PRODUCTION OF ENGLISH

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Abstract
This study aims at exploring to what extent transfer plays a role for young Italian learners of English. The informants consisted of a group of Italian high school students whose English written compositions are investigated. The collection of data is made up of an error analysis based on Pit Corder’s methodology (Corder in Ellis 2008: 46), in which six different linguistic categories are examined such as collocations, word order, the past tenses with special focus on the simple present perfect versus the simple past, furthermore the null subject parameter, false friends and subject-verb agreement. A brief discussion is also dedicated to the difference between what constitutes an error and a mistake. What emerges in this study is that the category of collocations is the one in which most instances of transfer errors are found followed by word order and the use of the simple past tense. Finally the research aims to find out what could be the plausible reasons as to why certain categories appear to be more subject to the transfer phenomena.

Keywords: Second language acquisition, L1 transfer, Italian mother tongue, Error analysis, Writing production
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1. Introduction

“A different language is a different vision of life” as Federico Fellini once said. This is especially true when it comes to second language learning. Any language learner whose mission is to master a second or even a third language adequately, has to adjust to a different way of thinking. Not only is it difficult for a language learner to adopt a new and a different language system, but most often many other different forces and mechanisms will inevitably come into play. One of these key mechanisms is commonly known as “language transfer or cross-linguistic transfer” (Ellis 2008:350) i.e. the influence of a learner’s first language (L1) knowledge on the second language (Lightbown & Spada 2014:5089). According to some researchers the term cross-linguistic transfer better reflects the complex phenomenon of transfer and the impact it may have on a language learner’s knowledge and use of other languages. (Lightbown & Spada 2014:5089).

The mechanism of transfer may affect either positively or negatively the various aspects of the learner’s spoken as well as written production in their second language (L2). For example, in the early as well as more advanced stages of the second language learning process, transfer may produce utterances such as *Is raining or *I have ten years old or even *I have been to London two years ago. Similarly, native speakers of English would probably never omit the subject in it is raining or say *has stood up instead of stood, using the simple present perfect so as refer to a concluded past event in a specific point in time. It is undoubtedly of great importance to further study these language errors in-depth as they may reveal interesting things about the learners’ current knowledge of the target language. As Cooks and Singleton (2014:1828) put it; “Whatever languages a learner knows will remain active in the system and can never be switched off”. The first and the second and even the third languages are intertwined and thus all depend and often co-exist with one another through the various stages of the learning process. The importance and the actual impact of language transfer in second language learning have long been studied and debated. The earliest theories regarded transfer as interference and the most prevailing view was that “like sin, error is to be avoided and its influence overcome, but its presence to be expected” (Brooks 1960 in Ellis 2008:350). More recent studies however regard language transfer as a natural part or simply as a communication strategy which definitely requires attention. In fact, the mother tongue (L1) appears to influence certain aspects of the language rather than others and therefore pronunciation and word order are more likely to influence the target language (TL) than grammatical features (Cooks Singleton 2014:1768). Whatever language is being studied, transfer phenomena become even more relevant as multilingualism is a reality and often a necessity for many people in the world today regardless of age, nationality or gender. Consequently, this study aims to find out more about the phenomenon of transfer and how and to what degree it affects the second language learner’s use of the target language.
2. AIMS AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The purpose of this study is to explore to what extent young Italians learning English as a second language are likely to be affected by their mother tongue in their written production of English. With this aim in mind, 12 compositions written by Italian high school students were investigated. Errors have been analysed and identified with regard to grammatical and lexical categories as follows:

- Word order
- Subject-verb agreement
- Null-subjects (independent clauses in which the subject is lacking)
- Past tenses (with special regard to simple present perfect vs. simple past as well as the pluperfect)
- Collocations
- False friends. This latter category consists of words which have the same or similar form in the two languages but with a different meaning in each. This may mislead the speaker to use the word wrongly in the L2.

The specific research questions which will be addressed in this study are the following:

- How many errors in each category are related to transfer errors?
- Which category contains the most transfer errors?
- What may be the reasons why certain categories are more subject to transfer than other categories?

The relevance of these research questions is that we live in a highly multilingual world where being multilingual is not a rare occurrence but a rather common phenomenon. Therefore, exploring the effects of the L1 on the L2 in terms of positive as well as negative transfer is of great practical value for those who teach or learn an additional language.
3. Theoretical framework and Previous Research

3.1 Error analysis (EA)
In this section I shall discuss the most salient features of the error analysis approach within the research of second language acquisition in order to give a short insight into how the research framework has developed to date.

The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis approach (CAH) was the main dominant approach within the field of second language acquisition until the late 60s. However, it had proved to give a very simplified picture of learners’ errors and had sought out to predict learners’ errors which with the course of time became inadequate to account for the many factors which come into play in the process of second learning acquisition (Ellis 2008: 350). This led researchers to adopt other strategies of investigating learners’ errors. One of the major responses to this inadequacy, was made by Pit Corder and colleagues, who published an influential article in 1967, “The Significance of Learners’ Errors”, which turned the CAH assumptions concerning transfer upside-down, by claiming that learners’ errors provide “a window into a language [system]” (Saville Troike 2008:39). Corder’s well- known “error analysis” which unlike the CAH perspective, viewed learners’ errors as rule- governed and which consequently reflected their current understanding and what strategies they adopted. Errors were viewed as a precious resource rather than an impediment. The main objective of the error analysis was not to predict errors based solely on interference as with the CAH approach, but rather to detect and describe errors in an attempt to understand how the second language is learnt. (Lightbown & Spada 2014:1071).

In the view of this, Corder (Ellis 2008: 46) outlined the empirical procedures, making up the theoretical basis for this present study. In order to carry out an effective error analysis, such procedures will be analysed in-depth further on, based on these following steps:

1. Collection of samples
2. Identification of errors
3. Description of errors
4. Explanation of errors
5. Evaluation of error

As for the collection of samples, it is highly probable that the nature of sample data may vary depending on whether the data consist of natural, spontaneous language use or elicited language. Hence, Corder argued for the elicited data as it is likely to produce more natural samples containing spontaneous language, and he also made a distinction between clinical elicitation and experimental elicitation, in which the former may consist of a general interview with the learner or asking the learner to simply write a composition. Conversely, experimental elicitation involves eliciting data with specific linguistic features which the researcher intends to investigate (Ellis 2008: 46).
The second and the third steps were designed as to identify and classify errors, which may not be such a simple matter as it is often difficult to identify what errors consist of (Ellis 2008:52). All learners make errors in both comprehension and production. Corder therefore concluded that errors and mistakes needed to be distinguished according to their systematicity (Corder 1974 in Ellis 2008: 48). Errors are of a more systematic nature, due to the learner’s “lack of knowledge” in the target language and more commonly produced by non-native speakers. Conversely, mistakes are “performance phenomena” or “slips of tongue” due to memory failure or made out of automaticity which is more typical of native speakers and should therefore be eliminated from the error analysis (Corder 1967 in Ellis 2008:48). Another issue concerning errors is whether the error is overt or covert. An overt error is easy to detect as they clearly deviate from the target language, a covert error may at first glance be well formed but it is not clear what the speaker means in that specific context.

For example:
*It was stopped (Corder 1971a in Ellis 2008:49).

On the surface this utterance looks well formed and grammatically correct until it is clarified by the context that the subject of the sentence it actually refers to the wind. A native speaker would have preferred the wind stopped (Ellis 2008:49).

As a rule, the description of errors entails comparing the English learner’s idiosyncratic utterances with a reconstruction of such utterances in the target language or with the help of a baseline corpus of native-speaker language. One way of dealing with idiosyncratic language in general terms is to distinguish between lexical and grammatical errors. Furthermore, grammar errors are also subdivided into other categories such as for example the auxiliary system, passive sentences and verb tenses. These latter categories are then broken down further, which means that the auxiliary system is sub-divided into ‘do’ ‘have’ and ‘be’, for example, and then analysed. The implementation of such taxonomic systems not only paves the way for both a detailed description of specific errors but also for a quantification of errors. Generally speaking, the number of lexical errors seems to exceed those of grammatical ones (Ellis 2008: 50).

The fourth step is one the most crucial stages of EA as it aims to establish the source of the error and to give account for why it was made. EA research distinguishes between two types of errors Inter-lingual and Intra-lingual. The former consists of “transfer/interference” errors which occur when the speaker imports language features from the L1 into the L2 or when the language feature lexically or semantically resemble the learner’s native language. Intra-lingual or developmental errors are similar whereas the latter are errors not due to negative language transfer. Further, intra-lingual errors are considered developmental errors as they result from incomplete learning of the L2 rules or even an over-generalisation of them (Saville Troike 2008:39). For example, a learner may produce *he is comes based on a mixture of the English structure he is coming and he comes (Richards 1985:147).

Admittedly, it is not a simple task to distinguish between these two types of errors and as a result many research findings in the field of EA have come to different conclusions. The EA
has demonstrated to be efficient explaining what learners do but, less efficient when it comes to predicting what they might do and why they do it (Lightbown Spada 2014:1115).

The fifth step consists of studying the possible effects that any language production may have on the addressee, that is “error gravity” (Khalill 1985 in Ellis 2008) which may be identified through three general criteria: intelligibility, acceptability and irritation. Ellis & Barhuizen (2005:56-57) discuss different views of what should be considered an error and comes to the conclusion produced by Lennon (1991:182 in Ellis & Barkhuizen 2005: 56), with a degree of scepticism:

A linguistic form or combination of forms which, in the same context and under similar conditions of production, would, in all likelihood, not be produced by the speakers’ native speaker counterparts.

This standpoint may of course be seriously questioned taking into account that native speakers of English are by no means a homogenous group, which means that even native speakers may make mistakes and this view will serve as the basis for my research question.

Selinker (Selinker 1972 in Ellis 2008:42) took a slightly different view by claiming that most errors are consistent with the learner’s developing rule system, so called interlanguage (IL). Selinker coined this concept in 1972, to refer to “the special mental grammars that learners constructed” (Ellis 2008:42) throughout the various phases of the learning process as they gradually approached the target language. This theory relies on the assumption that learners are active in “constructing these grammars” (Ellis 2008:42). To put it simply, the interlanguage is a dynamic language system which the L2 learner has developed and continues to evolve before reaching proficient mastery in the target language. This language system includes features from the L1 or omissions from the L2 such as morphemes or function words or even over-generalisation, i.e. new language patterns learnt in the target language.

Selinker thereafter went on to coin the term fossilisation, which indicates features in which a learner’s language stops developing at a certain stage of the learning process due to lack of instruction or feedback. Fossilisation is probably due to faulty suppositions about the target language rather than to interference from the first (Lightbown & Spada 2014:1079). As a conclusion of this fifth step, Selinker viewed language transfer as one of the five processes responsible for fossilisation, placing it at the top of his list (Nemser 1971 in Ellis 2008:364).

3.2 Language Transfer or Cross-linguistic Influence
The study of language transfer or cross-linguistic influence i.e. how and to what extent our native language influences the acquisition of a second language has been cause for intense debate in the field of applied linguistics (Ellis 2008:350). This is indeed, a multifaceted and complex phenomenon and with no clear-cut answers. There is considerable controversy over the extent to which interference (negative transfer) accounts for the numerous errors made by anyone learning a new language. As Odlin concludes:
Despite the counterarguments...there is a large and growing body of research that indicates that transfer is indeed a very important factor in second language acquisition (Odlin 1989:4 in Ellis 2008:351).

Transfer studies however raise some important issues. The first problem concerns whether to consider transfer as part of communication or part of the learning process or a mixture of both. A second problem concerns the choice of what constitutes valid data to examine. Thirdly, how to identify incidences of transfer and lastly, how to measure the effects of transfer (Ellis 2008: 351). As for the first methodological issue, Corder (1983 in Ellis 2008:351) for example, considered language transfer a communication strategy which he named ‘borrowing’ and not as part of a learning process. In contrast, Kellerman and Odlin (in Ellis 2008: 352) view it “as a phenomenon of acquisition as well as use”. Transfer data can be collected by means of reception (reading, listening) or production (speaking, writing). Kellerman for example, suggested that narratives may be a particularly fruitful source of data as it constitutes the context for investigating both linguistic and conceptual aspects of language transfer (Ellis:2008:352). The third problem is concerned with the identification of transfer in the data collection and one way of doing this is by comparing different linguistic variables as proposed by Selinker (1969) such as the learner’s inter-language (IL), the learner’s L1 and the target language (TL) (Ellis 2008:353). The IL approach takes into account whether the learner comes from a single L1 background or from two or even more L1 backgrounds. In other words, if the learner is bilingual or even multilingual (Ellis 2008:353). The final issue involves measuring cross-linguistic effects, which may be done through analysing these following phenomena:

- **Errors** (negative transfer), how the native language interferes with the acquisition of another (Ellis 2008:349). It is worth noting that many studies in SLA have sought to determine whether an error is the result of transfer or intralingual errors, i.e the result of general processes of language development which may also be observed in L1 acquisition (Ellis 2008:355).
- **Facilitation or Simplification** (positive transfer), a sort of strategy that is likely to occur when the learner perceives similarities between their L1 and L2.
- **Avoidance** that is, omitting certain language features which the learner finds difficult due to differences between their L1 and the target language (Ellis 2008:357).
- **Over-use or over–indulgence** of certain language features. A quite frequent example of this is when the learner tends to over-generalise the regular simple past tense inflection to irregular verbs for example, *costed* or when the learner overuses certain L2 features in a large number of contexts more frequently than the same feature is used by the mother tongue speaker (Ellis 2008:358).

Within transfer studies arose as a counter-reaction to the CAH approach, the so-called minimalist position, which played down the role of transfer whereas the CAH over-predicts
both the transferability of specific items and fails to explain when they are transferred and when they are not (Ellis 2008:379). Today the term cross-linguistic influence is commonly used to describe the process of any kind of language learning as by no means unidirectional but rather multifaceted. The features we may learn in a second or even third language have an impact on how we perceive the languages we learnt previously (Lightbown & Spada 2014:1429). In other words, when it comes to second language acquisition there is an ongoing interaction between the first language and the other acquired languages. Early research was more focused on word order problems and morphemes rather than vocabulary. Recent research however gives more emphasis to vocabulary as it is of utmost importance to use a great variety of vocabulary in different settings (Lightbown & Spada 2014:1430).

3.3 Notions of Italian Grammar

As it is my intention with this study to further investigate if the native language has influenced or been transferred into the written compositions of Italian L2 learners of English, hence follows a few notions with regard to Italian grammar and the grammatical obstacles Italian L2 learners may encounter before reaching full mastery of English. One typical obstacle is word order as Italian follows a SVO pattern but is subject to variation due to its many inflections. As a matter of fact, Italian may have other arrangements such as SOV, VSO or OVS orders depending on what is being emphasised. English word order is quite rigid and “in contrast to some languages, word order is affected little by pragmatic factors.” (Slobin 1985 in Chapetón 2008:581) Instead, Italian word order is flexible.

It allows syntactic structures such as follows:

SVO  
Io  mangio  la mela  
SUBJECT  VERB  OBJECT  
I  eat  the apple.

VOS  
Mangio  la mela  io  
VERB  OBJECT  SUBJECT  
eat  the apple  I

OVS  
La mela  la  mangio  io  
OBJECT  DIR.OBJ.-PRONOMEN  VERB  SUBJECT  
the apple  it  eat  I

VSO  
Mangio  io  la mela  
VERB  SUBJECT  OBJECT  
eat  I  the apple

(Chapetón 2008)

In Italian, SVO, VOS, and OVS orders are allowed in colloquial speech, and VSO is permitted in written prose.
Another example to illustrate word order differences:

The plumber mended the broken pipe
L’idraulico aggiustò il tubo rotto
Subject verb direct object adjective

The Italian word order follows a normal SVO pattern but there are however some differences in comparison with English. In English the adjective precedes the noun whereas in Italian the adjective rotto (Eng. broken) comes after the noun tubo (Eng. pipe) Another important difference is the subject-verb agreement. In Italian the verb aggiustò (Eng. mended) has a singular inflection as it has to agree with the singular subject l’idraulico (Eng. plumber) (Cook Singleton 2014:1702). Moreover, Italian articles agree with nouns for gender and number as in the example the noun pipe, which is masculine, becomes il tubo rotto (Eng. the broken pipe) whereas in the case of the plural it becomes i tubi rotti. (Eng. the broken pipes).

Another difference between English and Italian is the so called pro-drop parameter introduced by Noam Chomsky. Italian is unlike English or German a pro-drop language which means that the subject may be omitted or is by no means compulsory due to the different verb inflections in Italian. (Cook Singleton 2014:1703) An example of this is the sentence *Is raining which should have been It is raining since in Italian the subject pronoun esso (Eng. it) is often omitted. This means that an Italian learner of English has to switch from a pro-drop setting to a non pro-drop setting. Based on what was mentioned earlier concerning the concept of transfer, an Italian learner of English is likely to transfer these grammar notions from Italian into English and as a result it is not strange to come across sentences like *Is raining in their written production.

Moreover, there are some differences between English and Italian in how the simple past and simple present perfect are perceived. The simple present perfect form or the passato prossimo in Italian is formed by the auxiliary to have (It. avere) or the auxiliary to be (It. essere) to denote an action which was completed in the past.

Example: I last saw my husband a year ago/last year.
Ho visto mio marito l’ultima volta un anno fa/l’anno scorso.

The simple past (imperfetto) in Italian describes incomplete actions in the past, which means that it is not clear when a particular action started or finished. These differences are likely to cause confusion for Italian learners of English as they may transfer this particular feature of the simple present perfect into English (Maiden Robustelli 2013:11692). The pluperfect in Italian generally corresponds to the had + past participle in English which indicates a past event or occurrence before another past event or situation (Maiden Robustelli 2013:11411).
4. Material and Method

The method that has been adopted in this study is an error analysis which follows Corder’s (1974 in Ellis 2008:46) tradition with the five different steps as previously discussed in 3.1:
1. Collection of a sample of learner language
2. Identification of errors
3. Description of errors
4. Explanation of errors
5. Error evaluation

The execution of these steps will however be slightly simplified which in more specific terms means that the three last steps will put together as one step.

4.1 The Participants

The participants consisted of twelve Italian high school students, six females and six males, aged 14-18, from three different public schools in Rome. They all intended to take the Cambridge First Certificate exam, as this would give them extra credits in their final high school diploma and they have been attending an extra-curricular course held by a private language school once a week after the regular school hours since mid-October 2014. The participants all had a B1/B2 level of English as this was the required level to attend the course for Italian mother tongue speakers. Some of them have made short study holidays in Britain and the USA. However, the majority of them have been studying English mainly at school since the age of 7-8. All the students agreed to have their compositions investigated in this study. One female student was under the age of 15, however her parents gave the permission to have her composition investigated.

4.2 Data Collection and the Procedures

As previously discussed in section 4, the method for this paper is based on Corder’s error analysis which includes (1974 in Ellis 2008:46) five different steps in which the three last steps have been put together as one step in order to simplify the execution of the analysis. As for the practical aspect of this analysis is concerned, I have used my own knowledge of both English and Italian which I have gained from academic studies in both languages as well as from my own experience of teaching Italian L1 learners of English. I have also consulted various grammar references (see Bibliography) in both languages to support my findings.

The sample data was collected from a written task based on one of the exam questions in the writing part two of the FCE exam and was carried out in April and May 2015. The topic of the composition/story of at least 200 words began with this following sentence: *Laura realised the girl’s bag was still on the café chair.* The story also had to include a bus trip and a surprise. The time limit for this task was set for 60 minutes and no dictionaries or other additional reference sources were allowed. All the instructions as well as further clarifications for the task were all given only in English by the researcher prior to the start of the written composition task as this preparation course has always been held in English.
As mentioned in section 2, this study is mainly aimed at investigating the role of transfer in these high school students’ written production. The criterion for what constitutes a transfer error in this specific study is when an utterance (according to the language category in question) contains imported language features from Italian into English.

5. Results and Analysis

As a reminder of what has been said before this study is aimed at answering these following question:

• How many of these errors in each category are related to transfer errors?
• Which category contains the most transfer errors?
• What may be the reasons why certain categories are more subject to transfer than other categories?

The areas of interest in this quantitative research project is twofold. Firstly, at the grammatical level in which these following categories were studied: Word order, null subjects (i.e. omission of subject or pro-drop parameter), the use of the past tenses such as simple present perfect versus simple past or pluperfect as well as subject-verb agreement. Secondly, at the lexical level in particular the two categories collocations as well as false friends were investigated.
Table 1 above shows the total number of errors found, which were 151 with regard to the six above mentioned categories, in which 79 were related to transfer errors. The category which contained the most transfer errors was within the category of collocations.

**Table 2. Word order errors**

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<table>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total number of errors</strong></td>
<td>16 (10.6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Transfer errors</strong></td>
<td>16 (20.2%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The above table shows the total number related to word order errors which accounted for 10.6% including both the total amount of errors as well as the transfer errors. It may seem somewhat surprising that the total amount of errors as well as the transfer errors coincide, but one must bear in mind as stated previously in section 3.4 that Italian has a much more flexible word order compared to English. To illustrate this better, here follows some examples of the most salient transfer errors.
(1)*There was strange people beside your table? (Male student, aged 16)
C’era gente strana vicino al tuo tavolo?
Correct: Were there strange people beside your table?

(2)*Laura were in a caffè, when arrived Sofia. (Female student, aged 16)
Laura era nella caffetteria quando è arrivata Sofia.
Correct: Laura was in the café when Sofia arrived.

As mentioned earlier, the Italian word order is less rigid and it is therefore possible to make use of an SVO pattern even in interrogatives as in the first example sentence (Lahousse & Lamiroy 2012: 396). Meisel, Clahsen, and Pienemann (1981 as cited by) (Pica 2005: pages 263-280), carried out an extensive study on guest workers who had emigrated to Germany with mainly Romance languages and Turkish as their L1. Their study confirmed that the guest workers were likely to transfer basic word order from their L1 into German. Most strikingly, the researchers found that SVO order in Italian and Spanish seems to have influenced some guest workers to use of SVO instead of SOV order in German subordinate clauses. (Pica 2005: pages 263-280). The overall result of transfer errors connected with word order in the present study is fairly low but not so surprising. As a matter of fact, as Odlin (Ellis 2008: 365) argued word order is most likely a problem with beginners. Further, learners are highly conscious of word order and also successful in identifying word order problems and even tend to imitate word order patterns from other languages. In fact in Odlin’s study (1990) Korean-English bilinguals and Spanish-English bilinguals were more successful in identifying word order errors rather than article errors (Ellis 2008: 366). Applying Odlin’s conclusion to the present study, one could conclude that these informants are not beginners and thus transfer errors connected with word order are restricted.

Table 3. Subject-verb agreement errors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number of errors</th>
<th>27 (17,9%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transfer errors</td>
<td>1 (0.01%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(3)*Was there strange people beside your table? (Male student, aged 16)
C’era della gente strana accanto al tuo tavolo?
Correct: Were there strange people beside your table?

Only one clear transfer error was found among the total of 27 errors. Example 3, the most presumable reason why this transfer error occurred is that the English plural noun people (It. gente) is not a plural noun in Italian. The equivalent Italian noun gente is conjugated with the 3rd person singular form and not the plural form as in English.
There were my life in it, my phone, my wallet, with my credit card and my new book to send to some editors. (Male student, aged 16)

Là dentro c’era la mia vita, il mio cellulare, il mio portafoglio con la mia carta di credito e il mio nuovo libro da mandare a qualche editore.

Correct: There was my life in it.

In example 4 above, the problem is basically of the same nature. The noun life is the actual subject of the phrase, but since the sentence continues followed by a comma, a fair guess is that the student in question has probably considered all the things that were in the bag and therefore conjugated the verb to be in the plural form. This latter error has not been counted as a transfer error since in Italian the noun life with the function of a subject in this phrase would be singular just as it is in English. One possible explanation why some errors related to subject-verb agreement may not necessarily be linked to transfer errors, is that these types of errors are frequently recurrent in both L2 learners with L1 languages in which the morphemes indicate person and number on verbs as for example in Italian or French, but also common in learners whose L1 does not possess this feature as for example Chinese. Such errors are referred as developmental errors in that they can be similarly made by a young English mother tongue speaker. This is to say that such errors reflect more the learners’ current understanding of the target language rather than their tendency to transfer language features from their L1 into the TL. (Lightbown & Spada 2014: 1105).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4. Collocation errors</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transfer errors</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Not surprisingly, this above category contained the most transfer errors and accounts for 49,3 % of all the transfer errors found. It must be admitted however that it is not a simple task to determine what expressions should be counted as a collocation. Therefore, in this specific study Carter’s view (Carter 1988 in Sadeghi 2009) was adopted which means that collocation is considered a set of words which typically occurs together in predictable patterns to varying degrees in different contexts. These patterns may entail so called unrestricted collocations such as have breakfast/shower/a good time for example, where all the three noun phrases may replace one another or so called restricted collocations (Carter 1998 in Sadeghi 2009) in which fixed phrases such as cash and carry or pros and cons are idiomatic expressions and therefore fixed or restricted

Laura said sorry and she decided to go to house. ( Male student, aged 17)

Correct: Laura said sorry and she decided to go home.

This example 5, seems to be a direct translation of the Italian collocation andare a casa which simply has become go to house.
When she arrived at the first stop she thought to enter another time in the bar (Female student, aged 17)

Quando è arrivata alla prima fermata dell’auto pensava di entrare un’altra volta nel bar.

Correct: When she arrived at the first stop she thought of entering the bar again.

In example 6, the use of think to do is a lexis transfer or direct translation for the Italian ‘pensava di’ instead of ‘to think of doing sth’ which would have been more appropriate in this context. Moreover, another time, sounds odd here and seems to have been translated directly from Italian, un’altra volta (Eng.another time) and is consequently counted as a transfer error. A more correct collocation would have been one more time or again.

The bus driver saw her but he make a malicious smile and started laughing. (Male student, aged 17)

L’autista l’ha vista ma le ha fatto un sorriso malizioso e ha cominciato a ridere.

Correct: The bus driver saw her but he gave her a malicious smile and started laughing.

In example 7, the expression make a malicious smile is another transfer error as in colloquial Italian it is common to use the verb to make sb a smile (It.fare un sorriso) instead of to give somebody a smile. Furthermore, it is also a tense and consequently concord error.

At the same time a boy went up on the bus, he really looked worried. (Female student aged 16)

Allo stesso tempo un ragazzo è salito sull’autobus, sembrava molto preoccupato.

Correct: In the same time a boy got on the bus, he looked really worried.

As example 8 illustrates, another recurrent transfer error which was found in several stories was go up a bus instead of get on a bus. The reason for this transfer problem is most likely linked to the fact that in Italian the verb salire (it.to go up) corresponds to the English phrasal verb to get on. These listed errors are likely to occur not because the learner has misunderstood the meaning of a collocation but simply because a non-native speaker is not able to produce adequate combinations of words in the TL.

Table 5. Null subject errors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number of errors</th>
<th>3 (1,9%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transfer errors</td>
<td>3 (3,8%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

They went walk but when arrived were too late. (Female student, aged 16)

Sono andati a piedi ma quando sono arrivati era troppo tardi.

Correct: They went on foot but when they arrived, it was too late.

As illustrated in this table, the null subjects parameter makes up a low percentage of all the errors found. This despite the fact that Italian belongs to a null subject language, which is the conclusions in two studies by White (1985;1986 as cited in Ellis 2008: 612) showing that L2
learners tend to opt for the null subject parameter. However, as they are getting more proficient in the target language they consequently drop the null parameter of their L1 gradually. In view of this, the L2 learners in the present study are all getting increasingly proficient as they are preparing for the FCE exam. These L2 learner can therefore be expected to have overcome this null subject obstacle in order to pass the exam successfully.

**Table 6.** The simple present perfect vs. the simple past errors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number of errors</th>
<th>62 (41%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transfer errors</td>
<td>18 (22.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(10) *I’ve looked for it everywhere but I haven’t found it.* (Male student, aged 17)
L’ho cercato dappertutto ma non l’ho trovato.
Correct: I looked for it everywhere but I didn’t find it.

In this particular context these utterances occurred in a sequence of events in the past and it is therefore to be considered as concluded. As already discussed in section 3.1 This specific sentence may be considered a covert error as it is not clear from the context when exactly in the past and what the subject in question had been looking for.

(11) *They were meet two hour ago.* (Female student, aged 16)
Si sono visti due ore fa.
Correct: They met two hours ago.

Example 11, is a clear transfer error of the equivalent form in Italian *si erano incontrate.* (Eng. *they had met*). The Italian verb *incontrarsi* (Eng. *to meet*) is a clitic reflexive verb which takes the auxiliary *essere* (Eng. *to be*). This particular sentence is a transfer error as the students has literally translated the Italian verb form into English without taking into account that simple past form of *met* would have been more correct as this context suggests that it is a concluded action in the past.

(12) *After taking a walk through the other wagons, she realised that everyone was fainted.* (Male student, aged 17)
Dopo aver attraversato tutti i vagoni, lei si rese conto che erano tutti svenuti.
Correct: After taking a walk through/passing through the other wagons, she realised that everyone had fainted.

Example 12, is also a transfer error and probably a direct translation as the pluperfect of the verb *svenire* (Eng. *to faint*) in Italian is formed with the simple past auxiliary form of the verb *to be* (It. *era*) and not *had* as in English.

(13) *Maybe there was a thief that has stolen your bag!*
Forse è stato un ladro che l’ha rubato.
Correct: Maybe a thief stole your bag. (Female student, aged 16)
Example 13 would have been correct but not in this context as the student in question tells an episode of a sequence of past events which all occur one after another. It would have been more appropriate to use the simple past instead of the simple present perfect. As previously mentioned this is to be found in section 3.4 above, a typical problem for Italian learners as they tend to misuse the passato prossimo (Eng. simple present prefect) with past concluded events.

What is interesting with regard to all the tense errors found is that the simple past perfect form was hardly ever used in many of the compositions of this study considering the fact that it is a tense which is commonly used in Italian and most students at this level should be familiar with it. One possible reason for this could be that the students have made use of the so called strategy of avoidance, which according to Schachter (1974 in Lightbown & Spada 2014:1398, Ellis 2008:61) means that learners avoid certain language features as they perceive them simply to be too difficult. It is worth mentioning studies such as the one by Klein (1995 in Ellis 2008) related to the order in which Lavinia, an Italian learner acquired English verbal morphology. According to Klein, the past perfect simple form was the last verb form that Lavinia acquired (Ellis 2008:89).

Table 7. False friends errors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total number of errors</th>
<th>2 (1,3%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Transfer errors</td>
<td>2 (2,5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown above, the final table of this study deals with false friends, in which only two instances of transfer errors were found.

(14) *Suddenly a monster compared.* (Male student, aged 16)
All’improvviso è apparso un mostro.
Correct: All of a sudden a monster appeared.

In example 14, the English verb to compare has been mixed up with the Italian comparire (Eng. appear) and where the 3rd person singular simple past from becomes compared (Eng. He/ she /it/ appeared).

(15) *She understood what was going on and really surprised and thankful she asked Laura to stay for a drink and restore.* (Female student, aged 17)
Ha capito che cosa stava succedendo e molto sorpresa e grata ha chiesto a Laura di rimanere per un drink e ristorarsi.
Correct: She understood what was going on and really surprised and grateful she asked Laura to stay for a drink and refresh.

In example 15, given the context there must have been another ‘mix-up’or mistranslation of the Italian verb restorare which means refresh. It therefore looks and sounds like the English
verb *restore*. Thus the student in question must have direct translated the Italian verb *ristorare* with the English verb *restore*, thinking that the meaning is the same in English.

The total amount of false friends was rather low considering that there are quite a few insidious false friends between Italian and English. One may assume that these students do not perceive Italian words or expression to be transferrable. In fact, Kellerman argued that learners “form projections” (Ellis 2008:391) about what can be transferred from their native language into their target language based on whether they perceive the two languages to be similar or not. In view of this, one could assume that the informants in this study perceive Italian and English too distant and therefore many languages features such as those of false friends are not perceived as transferrable.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

As already stated in section 3.2, the total number of transfer errors from all the categories investigated were 79 out of a total of 151. This means that the total amount of the transfer related errors accounts for 52.3 per cent of all the errors in the twelve compositions examined. This study found, as previously mentioned, that the category of collocations was the area in which most transfer errors were found. As many as 39 collocational transfer errors out of 41 total errors were related to transfer, which accounts for 49.3% of the total number of transfer errors followed by the categories of past tense and word order. Furthermore, the categories which contained the fewest numbers of transfer errors were null-subjects, false friends and subject-verb agreement.

What also emerged from this study is that L1 transfer seems to be a common strategy that these Italian high school students adopt especially in their English written production of collocations, past tenses and word order as the total amount of these types of transfer errors totally accounted for 73 out of 151. What is further noticeable in these L2 learners of English is that their L1 plays a significant role in generating the wrong word combination i.e collocation errors in their target language. Another conclusion which may be drawn from this study is that most transfer related errors in the collocation category occurred in verb + noun collocations such as in the examples of ‘*go to house* instead of *go home* or with adjective + verb collocations. Although these above mentioned findings are the results from a small-scale study, they are however in line with other research findings concerning collocational transfer errors even though the informants in these studies were native speakers of different languages. As for example, Nesselhauf (2003) demonstrated with his study that the impact of transfer in German mother tongue students of English was significantly high, in which 56% of all collocational errors in L2 written production were attributable to the interference from their mother tongue. (Nesselhauf 2003 in Sadeghi 2009). Other studies have shown similar results that transfer errors tend to be more common in the lexical level as well as in the phonological level of language rather than in the grammatical level (Ellis 2008:55). In fact, Grauberg, (1971 in Ellis 2008:355) also found that lexical transfer errors made by adult German learners of English as a second language accounted for a total of 25 per cent compared to syntactic errors which only accounted for 10 per cent. Other reasons why such
utterances such as *go to house or *make a malicious smile occurred may be that the learners in question believed that these expressions may be transferrable into English based on the learner’s perception of language distance, that is, the learner perceives that there is little distance between the L1 and the TL and this perception triggers transfer errors (Ellis 2008:391).

Another important observation worth noting, is that the past tense aspect, in particular in the correct usage of past simple was subjected to transfer phenomenon. The reasons for this may be that there is a preference for using the present perfect simple instead of the past simple tense especially in Romance languages (Ellis 2008:89). A study carried out by Collins (Ellis 2008:371) confirmed French learners of English were more prone to use the passé composé tense (Eng. Simple present perfect) where English would have required the simple past in accordance with what these Italian high school students did. Collins concluded that the reasons for this behaviour was that there is a preference for Francophone learners to use the present perfect simple instead of the past simple tense especially with verbs expressing the telic aspect, which means that the verbs in question refer to a concluded and finished actions in the past. Although these Italian high school students in this study have been exposed and have most likely acquired the past tense features in English, the learners are not always able to use them correctly. In fact, the same phenomenon was reported by Lantolf and Thorne (2006 in Ellis 2008:90) based on a study made on a group of university-instructed L2 learners of Spanish, who used the imperfect tense inappropriately in communicative speech and writing.

In conclusion, a few words must be spent on the categories which in this study resulted to be least influenced by the learners’ L1. As for the category of subject-verb agreement, only one clear transfer error was found out of a total of 27. This category alongside with the category of null-subjects and false friends are found to be the two categories least subject to transfer errors. The nature of the written task, in this study in the form of a story, may not have encouraged any use of false friends as expected, which are usually a trap for most Italian learners of English. Furthermore, the errors found in the category of null-subjects seem all to be related to transfer as this is a common feature in Italian. (see section Italian grammar).

7. Teaching Implications

This study provides English teachers of L2 high school learners a precious insight into what language features seem to be consolidated in their students’ learning process and what language features still present a major obstacle. On the one hand, it helps the instructor focus on the most problematic language areas for Italian native speakers instead of focusing on those language aspects which do not derive from their L1 as to make their learning experience more effective and purposeful.

On the other hand, it enables the students to be aware of what kind of errors based on their mother tongue they are most likely to make, and what may cause confusion or even annoyance in their interlocutors. In order to enhance these students’ knowledge concerning
the use of collocations as well as other language features dealt with in this study, whether it concerns written or spoken English, these students would definitely benefit from a more communicative and content-based instruction where the emphasis is more on the communication of meaning both between teachers and fellow students and where students are exposed to a vast range of discourse types. Unfortunately, my personal experience is that this is not always the case in many secondary state schools in Italy, a great deal of emphasis is still given to *Initiation/Response/Evaluation* (IRE) in which the teacher asks questions and students answer these questions and are then evaluated (Lightbown & Spada 2014:2818). What has changed in recent years for the better though, is that young Italian learners today are far more exposed to English in general compared with previous generations, either from the Internet, TV or from other sources. Moreover, their parents are more than ever before determined to help their children achieve proficient mastery of English as a springboard into the future.
8. BIBLIOGRAPHY


9. Appendix

You have seen this announcement on an English-language website for young people.

We are looking for stories for our website. Your story must begin with this sentence:

*Laura realised the girl’s bag was still on the café chair.*

Your story must include:

- A *bus trip*
- A *surprise*

Write your *story* in 200 words in maximum 60 minutes. Dictionaries are *not* allowed.

Laura realised the girl’s bag was still on the café chair......