LINGUISTIC INTERFERENCE OF THE NATIVE LANGUAGE IN THE ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES

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ABSTRACT: Grammatical interference, or negative transfer, remains a persistent challenge in English as a Second Language (ESL) acquisition, particularly when learners apply syntactic and morphological rules from their native language (L1) to English. This study offers a qualitative-descriptive synthesis of empirical and theoretical research examining the nature, causes, and pedagogical implications of L1-induced grammatical errors among ESL learners. Drawing on contrastive analysis theory and interlanguage theory, the paper categorizes common interference patterns in morphology (e.g., tense inflection, pluralization, article usage) and syntax (e.g., word order, negation, modifier placement). The findings indicate that interference is systematic and strongly influenced by the typological distance between L1 and English. Errors are especially pronounced in areas where learners' native languages lack grammatical equivalents found in English. While such errors often persist over time, they can be mitigated through targeted instructional interventions. Effective strategies include contrastive grammar instruction, metalinguistic awareness activities, timely corrective feedback, and the use of learner corpora for tailored error analysis. The study emphasizes the importance of aligning grammar instruction with learners' linguistic backgrounds and advocates for more responsive and individualized pedagogical approaches. It concludes by recommending further longitudinal research and enhanced teacher training to support grammar instruction in multilingual ESL contexts.

Keywords: grammatical interference, negative transfer, ESL, contrastive analysis, interlanguage theory, morphology, syntax, error correction, L1 influence, pedagogy

INTRODUCTION

Grammatical interference, also known as negative transfer, represents a significant obstacle in second language acquisition (SLA). It occurs when learners inadvertently apply rules or structures from their native language (L1) while attempting to use a second language (L2), resulting in syntactic, morphological, and sometimes semantic inaccuracies. These errors are not random; they are often systematic and traceable to structural mismatches between the learner's L1 and the target language. In the context of English as a Second Language (ESL) learning, such interference can be especially problematic due to the considerable grammatical differences between English and many other world languages. For example, languages that lack articles, such as Russian, Chinese, or Uzbek, frequently cause learners to omit or misuse articles in English. Similarly, speakers of languages with flexible word order or different tense-aspect systems often struggle with English syntax and verb conjugation. These issues are not merely superficial mistakes; they reflect deep-rooted cognitive patterns formed through early linguistic socialization. When these L1-based frameworks are transferred into L2 production, learners may internalize incorrect structures, making them more resistant to correction over time. Conventional teaching methods—such as rote memorization of grammar rules, repetitive

drills, or isolated error correction—often prove inadequate in overcoming the entrenched nature of L1 influence. As a result, learners may continue to exhibit the same grammatical errors even after years of instruction, suggesting that traditional pedagogical strategies need to be re-examined and refined to effectively address the problem of interference.

Beyond its impact on grammatical accuracy, interference can hinder communicative fluency and learner confidence. Persistent errors may cause learners to feel discouraged, especially when they are unable to self-correct or when correction from instructors lacks clarity or context. This underscores the need for teaching approaches that not only identify interference patterns but also offer meaningful, learner-centered solutions that address the cognitive roots of these errors. The current study aims to explore the nature and extent of grammatical interference caused by native language structures in the acquisition of English grammar. It also seeks to examine methodological and instructional strategies that can be employed to mitigate the negative effects of this phenomenon. In doing so, the paper draws on a comparative analysis of empirical studies and theoretical models that document specific error types and effective intervention techniques. Through this investigation, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of the linguistic and pedagogical dynamics at play in ESL learning environments and offers practical recommendations for teachers, curriculum designers, and language policy makers.

By focusing on grammatical interference, this research also contributes to the broader field of applied linguistics, particularly in the areas of contrastive analysis, interlanguage development, and error correction methodology. It emphasizes the importance of aligning instructional practices with the linguistic backgrounds of learners and integrating metalinguistic awareness into grammar teaching. Ultimately, the goal is to promote more effective, responsive, and inclusive approaches to grammar instruction that support learners in achieving higher levels of linguistic competence and communicative confidence.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative-descriptive research design aimed at synthesizing and interpreting existing scholarly findings related to the phenomenon of grammatical interference among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. Rather than generating primary data through experimental procedures or fieldwork, this approach focuses on the systematic examination and critical evaluation of previously conducted empirical research. The selection of this design is grounded in the nature of the research question, which seeks to elucidate patterns of L1-induced grammatical transfer and pedagogical responses rather than to test a specific hypothesis under controlled conditions. The primary data for this study consist of peer-reviewed articles, conference proceedings, and academic reports that examine morphological and syntactic interference in ESL contexts. Particular attention was given to studies involving learners with diverse linguistic backgrounds, in order to capture a broad spectrum of interference types. Included works provided either quantitative error analyses or qualitative descriptions of learner output, teacher observations, and instructional interventions. The studies selected spanned various educational contexts—ranging from secondary education to higher education—and included both classroom-based and standardized testing environments. The interpretation of data was guided by two interrelated theoretical lenses: Contrastive Analysis Theory (CAT) and Interlanguage Theory (IL). Contrastive Analysis Theory provided the foundation for identifying and predicting areas of grammatical difficulty by systematically comparing structural features of the learner's L1 with those of English. Through this

comparative lens, grammatical categories such as morphology (e.g., tense marking, plural formation, subject-verb agreement), syntax (e.g., word order, question formation, negation), and functional grammar elements (e.g., use of articles, auxiliary verbs, prepositions) were analyzed.

Interlanguage Theory complemented this approach by offering a developmental perspective. It was used to frame learner errors not merely as transfer-induced deviations, but as dynamic, rule-governed stages within the learner's evolving linguistic system. This allowed for a more nuanced understanding of how interference errors persist, evolve, or diminish over time, depending on input, instruction, and feedback. Error data from selected studies were extracted and organized according to their grammatical domain. For instance, morphological errors were classified into subcategories such as incorrect verb endings, omission of plural markers, and irregular past tense forms. Syntactic errors were grouped based on sentence structure violations, such as incorrect placement of modifiers or the use of L1 syntactic order in English output. Functional errors included issues like article misuse, inappropriate auxiliary verb usage, and prepositional errors. The extracted data were subjected to thematic coding in order to identify recurrent patterns and underlying causes of interference. This coding process also helped isolate pedagogical strategies referenced across studies, such as explicit grammar instruction, contrastive grammar exercises, corrective feedback techniques, and learner reflection tasks. While the secondary data approach ensures access to a wide range of linguistic contexts and learner populations, it also introduces certain limitations. The heterogeneity of the data—stemming from different research settings, L1 backgrounds, and proficiency levels—makes direct generalization problematic. Furthermore, since the study does not involve direct learner interaction, insights into real-time learner cognition and spontaneous grammatical performance are inferred rather than directly observed. Nevertheless, the triangulation of findings from multiple studies, supported by established theoretical models, enhances the validity and reliability of the conclusions drawn. This methodology allows for a robust understanding of L1 interference phenomena and provides a solid empirical foundation for the development of instructional interventions aimed at minimizing negative transfer in ESL grammar acquisition.

RESULTS

The synthesis of the reviewed empirical and theoretical literature reveals a consistent pattern of morphological and syntactic interference among ESL learners, with distinct trends emerging in relation to specific grammatical domains and native language backgrounds. One of the most salient findings pertains to morphological interference, particularly in areas where the learner's native language (L1) lacks grammatical features present in English. For instance, speakers of agglutinative languages such as Turkish or Uzbek, and analytic languages like Chinese or Vietnamese, often exhibit difficulties with inflectional morphology—a characteristic feature of English grammar. In such cases, learners frequently omit or misuse bound morphemes associated with tense, pluralization, and subject-verb agreement. The omission of third-person singular -s, irregular past tense forms, and plural markers were among the most recurrent error types identified across multiple studies. Similarly, the definite and indefinite article system in English—absent or used differently in many L1s—emerged as a persistent source of error, with learners either omitting articles entirely or using them inaccurately based on L1 conceptualizations of definiteness and specificity. With regard to syntax, interference was particularly evident in sentence structure, word order, and the

placement of modifiers. Learners often transferred L1-specific syntactic rules into their English production. For example, speakers of languages with SOV (Subject-Object-Verb) word order, such as Korean or Persian, tended to produce sentences in English that reflected their native syntactic sequencing, resulting in non-target-like structures. Common syntactic errors included misplacement of adjectives, adverbs, and negation elements, especially in embedded or complex sentence constructions. Moreover, learners from languages that permit more flexible word order due to case-marking or topic-comment structures—such as Russian or Japanese— frequently struggled with the fixed word order conventions of English, particularly in interrogative and negative sentence forms.

The degree and persistence of interference were closely linked to the typological distance between the learners' L1 and English. Structures that had no direct equivalent in the native language posed significant challenges, leading to persistent errors despite prolonged exposure. This was especially notable in the acquisition of the tense-aspect system in English, where learners from languages that do not grammatically encode temporal relations (e.g., Mandarin Chinese) exhibited frequent confusion in distinguishing between simple, continuous, and perfective aspects. These errors manifested in both spoken and written output, often resulting in semantically ambiguous or pragmatically inappropriate utterances. Despite the frequency and pervasiveness of these interference errors, the literature also acknowledges the cognitive utility of transfer during early interlanguage development. At initial stages of acquisition, learners tend to rely heavily on L1 rules as a heuristic device for processing and producing L2 input. This phenomenon aligns with interlanguage theory, which posits that learner language is a dynamic and evolving system shaped by input, feedback, and internal restructuring mechanisms. Over time, as learners receive adequate input, targeted instruction, and corrective feedback—either explicit or implicit—their interlanguage undergoes restructuring, allowing for the gradual abandonment of L1-based hypotheses in favor of more target-like constructions. Several longitudinal and classroom-based studies indicate that learners who receive consistent form-focused instruction and opportunities for communicative output demonstrate measurable gains in grammatical accuracy and a reduction in L1-induced errors. The data also suggest variation in the type and severity of interference based on learners' native language, age of acquisition, and overall proficiency. Intermediate learners, in particular, displayed a higher frequency of fossilized errors, whereas advanced learners showed increased metalinguistic awareness and self-correction ability. Nonetheless, even at advanced stages, certain fossilized interference patterns—especially those tied to deeply embedded L1 structures—remained resistant to change without deliberate pedagogical intervention.

DISCUSSION

The findings synthesized in this study affirm that grammatical interference from the native language (L1) in second language (L2) acquisition—particularly English—is a multifaceted phenomenon that transcends mere surface-level error production. It is instead indicative of deeper cognitive strategies and linguistic transfer processes that are shaped by the learner's internalized grammatical framework. These interference patterns are not random but demonstrate a degree of systematicity and predictability that, if properly understood, can provide a powerful foundation for pedagogical intervention. One of the most salient implications of the research is that L1-induced errors often reflect rule-governed behavior rooted in the learner's interlanguage—a transitional linguistic system shaped by the interplay between L1 knowledge, L2 input, and internal restructuring mechanisms. Consequently,

grammatical interference serves as both a diagnostic indicator of interlanguage development and a heuristic by which learners navigate unfamiliar L2 structures. Recognizing the predictability of interference patterns, particularly those associated with morphological and syntactic domains (e.g., tense marking, article usage, word order), provides instructors with a valuable diagnostic tool. By understanding the structural contrasts between a learner's L1 and English, educators can anticipate potential error zones and respond with preemptive instructional strategies rather than relying solely on reactive error correction.

Among the instructional approaches validated by the literature, contrastive analysis emerges as especially effective. By systematically comparing L1 and L2 grammatical structures, educators can explicitly highlight areas of divergence that are likely to cause interference. This comparison enhances learners' metalinguistic awareness—the ability to consciously reflect on language form and function—which has been shown to facilitate the restructuring of erroneous linguistic hypotheses in the interlanguage.

In conjunction with contrastive analysis, metalinguistic instruction—which prompts learners to analyze and verbalize grammatical rules—fosters deeper cognitive processing and rule internalization. This approach supports the transition from implicit, L1-based processing strategies to explicit, L2-oriented grammatical competence. For example, encouraging learners to articulate the differences in word order or article usage between their L1 and English has been shown to reduce fossilized patterns and promote more target-like production over time. Corrective feedback also plays a central role in mediating the effects of grammatical interference. Research emphasizes the importance of both implicit feedback (e.g., recasts, clarification requests) and explicit feedback (e.g., metalinguistic explanations, error correction tasks) in facilitating learner awareness and subsequent uptake. However, the timing, frequency, and contextualization of such feedback are critical. Feedback that is too frequent or decontextualized may overwhelm learners or fail to connect with their existing knowledge structures, whereas situated, task-based feedback has a higher likelihood of promoting meaningful learning and retention. A further pedagogical recommendation involves the use of learner corpora and error analysis tools to identify recurrent interference patterns within specific learner populations. By analyzing authentic language data, instructors can gain nuanced insights into the linguistic habits of their students and develop customized instructional materials that directly target problematic structures. Such corpus-informed approaches can also aid in curriculum design, ensuring that high-frequency interference issues are addressed systematically rather than incidentally.

In this context, L1-specific instructional materials—designed to reflect the linguistic background of the learners—have proven particularly effective. Tailoring content to anticipate and counteract known areas of interference (e.g., omission of articles by Russian speakers, misordered adjectives by Arabic speakers) helps learners develop contrastive awareness and accelerates the transition to target-like usage. Finally, the professional development of language teachers remains a cornerstone of effective interference mitigation. Teachers must possess not only a deep understanding of English grammar but also linguistic analytical skills that enable them to identify and interpret interference phenomena. Ongoing training in contrastive linguistics, interlanguage theory, and error analysis can equip educators with the theoretical and practical tools necessary to deliver informed, responsive, and linguistically principled instruction.

CONCLUSION

The present study reaffirms the significant role that native language interference plays in the acquisition of English grammatical structures among ESL learners. The analysis of existing literature and empirical findings illustrates that grammatical errors often stem from deep-seated cross-linguistic influences, particularly in domains where the learner's L1 exhibits substantial divergence from English. These patterns of interference are not arbitrary but follow discernible linguistic tendencies that, when systematically understood, can inform more effective pedagogical strategies. In light of the findings, the study advocates for a methodological reorientation in ESL instruction—one that prioritizes contrastive linguistic awareness, explicit metalinguistic reflection, and contextualized grammar teaching. Instruction that integrates these elements can substantially reduce the persistence of interference-related errors, especially when tailored to the specific linguistic backgrounds of learners. Rather than treating learner errors as isolated phenomena, educators should interpret them as manifestations of interlanguage development shaped by L1 influence, and use them as instructional entry points. Although grammatical interference cannot be entirely eradicated, it can be attenuated through targeted intervention, particularly when educators are equipped with the necessary theoretical and analytical tools. The findings underscore the importance of pedagogical responsiveness— designing grammar instruction that is sensitive to learner-specific needs and grounded in a solid understanding of linguistic contrasts. Looking forward, future research should pursue longitudinal investigations that map the evolution of grammatical interference across different stages of language proficiency. Such studies would yield valuable insights into the temporal dynamics of interlanguage restructuring and the factors that contribute to the attenuation or fossilization of interference errors. Furthermore, the integration of digital technologies and AI-driven platforms offers promising avenues for delivering adaptive and individualized grammar instruction. These tools can leverage learner data to diagnose interference patterns and provide personalized feedback, thereby enhancing learner autonomy and accelerating grammatical development.

Finally, the role of teacher education remains pivotal. Comprehensive training programs that incorporate contrastive linguistics, interlanguage theory, and error analysis methodologies are essential for preparing educators to navigate the complexities of multilingual classrooms. By fostering a linguistically informed teaching workforce, educational institutions can better address the challenges posed by native language interference and support learners in achieving higher levels of grammatical accuracy and fluency in English.

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