



The Effect of English as a Second Foreign Language On Learning Italian as a Third Foreign Language: A Learner Corpus-Based Research in Written Speech

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Abstract

In certain educational contexts, the study of learner corpora yields intriguing and valuable insights. This paper aims to examine and analyze the interference of English, learned as a foreign language, on the acquisition of Italian. To this end, we investigated a corpus of written productions by Greek students learning Italian as their first foreign language and a corpus of written productions by Greek students learning Italian as their second foreign language. Research on corpora has demonstrated its ability to provide both qualitative and quantitative insights into the interference effects of second-language acquisition on third-language learning. Our findings indicate notable patterns in the use of functional words; specifically, there is an underuse of articles and an overuse of personal pronouns, attributable to the structural differences between English and Italian. Conversely, students learning Italian as a third language displayed greater accuracy in their use of content words.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Corpus Linguistics and Error Analysis

For many decades, linguistics was not considered a scientific field until it was linked with the observation of phenomena, the formulation of hypotheses, and subsequently the empirical study and analysis of results that would confirm or reject the hypothesis (Lopez, 2009). The field of Corpus Linguistics moves in this direction, and it is considered "a whole system of methods and principles of how to apply corpora in language studies and teaching/learning" which "certainly has a theoretical status" (McEnery, Xiao & Tono, 2006). The nature of this tool called Corpus is particularly helpful for research in linguistic analysis and teaching for two reasons: on the one hand, the researcher relies on real data and not on intuitions or impressions (Lopez, 2009), and on the other hand, these data are authentic language (either produced by native speakers or by learners of the foreign language). Moreover, the reliability and validity of the results are more easily achieved through the study of corpora considering the extent of the data and the immediate and rapid processing due to their digital form. According to Bondi and Diani (2015), it is easier to identify the frequencies of individual elements, allowing us to recognize not only what is "possible" to say in a language, but also what is "likely" to be said.

All the above lead research to another aspect of language study, especially concerning foreign language teaching: the study of interlanguage through error analysis. Error analysis has faced considerable criticism in the past (James, 2013), but what it offers, namely the picture of a learner's interlanguage, remains irreplaceable in linguistic research.

1.2. Corpus linguistics error analysis and interference of previous languages

The major criticism that error analysis using corpora has received, as Ellis (2008) pointed out, is: "weaknesses in methodological procedures, theoretical problems, and limitations in scope." The quantitative analysis of these data results in some numbers of errors which we must categorize and analyze by attributing them to causes subjectively. Schachter and Murcia (1977) argued that the isolated presentation of errors presents a distorted picture. Therefore, linguists consider it a given that error analysis should be linked to the native or prior knowledge of other languages, that is, it should be supplemented with crosslinguistic analysis. In fact, 'learners are constantly trying to establish links between the target language and whatever prior linguistic knowledge they have' (Rinbom & Jarvis, 2009), which means that learners benefit themselves by finding cross-linguistic similarities and use them as a learning strategy.

2. BACKGROUND

In recent years, many scientists have been studying the influence that knowledge of previous languages—whether acquired or learned—has on the learning procedure of a foreign language. In multilingual classes, for example (Altenberg, 2002), one can extract some outcomes that indicate the terms within which each student can apply their bilingualism or multilingualism to third- or fourth-language learning. As Cenoz (2013) pointed out "bilinguals are more experienced language learners and have potentially developed learning strategies to a larger extent than monolinguals". Specifically, in written language, research has been conducted using error analysis for students writing in English (Lopez, 2009), with Spanish as their native language, or for students of English with Urdu as their native language (Aqeel et al., 2022). There are also studies on Spanish as a foreign language, such as Mendikoetxea's (2013) research, which relies on learner corpora and crosslinguistic analysis. Additionally, research on the learning of Italian has been conducted not through error analysis or intralinguistic analysis, but with an ethnographic approach to students' attitudes towards Italian (Worth, 2007). Vallerossa, Gudmudson, Bergstrom, and Bardel (2023) argue that in the process of learning Italian, the knowledge of previous foreign languages has an influence, especially if it involves the knowledge of Romance languages. This is evidenced by research conducted on a sample of Swedish students whose first foreign language was either English or a romance language. In this study (Vallerossa et al., 2023), it is emphasized that, regarding the verbal aspect, there is a difference, and those with prior knowledge of a Romance language performed better in the test. In another study referent to translation proficiency and its relation to Romance language knowledge, Smidfelt and Van de Weijer (2019) investigate how Swedish L1 upper secondary students process translation from Italian, an unknown language, into a known foreign language, English L2 or French and Spanish L3. "The quantitative results of the analysis of the overall task accuracy showed that the Spanish group reached the highest task accuracy, the French group second and the English group reached the lowest results".

Some researchers have discussed the interference of the first language in the second (Bingiun, 2013) or foreign language (Zdorenko & Paradis, 2012). As early as 1992, it was accepted that beyond the first language, there is a transfer of structures, mainly at the lexical level, from other foreign languages that the learner might know, especially if these are related (Ringbom, 1992). Subsequently, some studies demonstrated the positive influence of knowing two or more previous languages on the learning of a foreign language (Cenoz, 2001; Ringbom, 2001). In addition, Bardel and Falk (2012) claimed that "some recent studies show that L2 can take on a stronger role than L1 as a transfer source in L3 learning. A possible explanation for this phenomenon is the strong impact of the L2 status factor." As to Italian language teaching, research has confirmed that learners with the same L1 can behave in a substantially divergent way, when learning an L3, if their linguistic background is different. In fact, in a study (Izzo et al., 2017) that examined the crosslinguistic influence (CLI) from L1 and L2s in two groups of

multilingual learners of L3 Italian, those with a higher level in romance language (Spanish) had a better performance in Italian.

Paradis (2009) noted that students who know two languages possess metalinguistic knowledge, i.e., conscious knowledge about formally learned languages and crosslinguistic awareness. This enables them to compare linguistic systems from the other languages they know with the foreign language they are learning (Jessner, 2006). One can say that the potential effects of second-language acquisition on third-language learning have already been widely discussed in the last few decades. On the other hand, tools such as corpus linguistics and error analysis give the opportunity to study smaller monolingual or bilingual populations, such as Greek students, learning Italian as a second/foreign language

3. TEACHING ITALIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE IN GREECE

In order to investigate the case of learners of the Italian language in Greece, some information must be given about the position of the Italian language within the Greek educational environment. Italian is the fourth most taught foreign language in Greece and the fifth in Europe,¹ but Italian as a foreign language is not widely taught in public education in Greece, although it is rather popular amongst teenagers and adults. While English as a foreign language is introduced into the curriculum from preschool years, and French and German are included from the fifth grade at about ten years old, Italian is only offered in 36 schools in the country as an option in junior high school at the age of 12 according to the National Curriculum². Therefore, those interested in learning Italian turn to private institutions, which operate after school or to programs funded by the Ministry of the Interior and Labor (Milioni-Bertinelli & Drakouli, 2009). As a result, it is chosen as a third or even fourth foreign language. However, it should be noted that there are students of Italian who do not have any previous knowledge of another foreign language before learning Italian or who abandoned any attempt to learn a foreign language, discouraged by extra educational factors.

The knowledge of a first foreign language (in most cases English) is a fact for a high percentage of most language learners of Italian, because of the quick spreading “monoglot culture” or the “English is enough” mentality (Oakes, 2013). As a result of this fact, teachers of the Italian language expect more from students when they already know a second language, regarding learning strategies or crosslinguistic matters.

4. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

The research hypothesis for this study arises logically from the description of the class composition where Italian is taught as a second foreign language: a) knowing a foreign language (FL1) - in our case, English - is it a factor in performing better? b) And if so, what is the contribution of the first foreign language in learning the second foreign language? c) Is English the appropriate language to help in learning Italian or not? d) and more concretely, in which cases do Parts of Speech have a positive interference? e) in our case, the above questions will be examined in learners’ written language and, therefore, need to be studied in the written essays of students learning Italian, within the Department of Italian Language and Literature, as a foreign language.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To investigate the above hypothesis, we used two tools: a Learner Corpus and a Natural Language Processing tool (NLP). Although it is overly ambitious to assume that error detection

¹ <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2979>

² <http://ebooks.edu.gr/ebooks/v2/ps.jsp>

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and feedback can be entirely automated (Granger et al., 2007), we can use NLP tools in learner corpora to process the data from manual annotation.

5.1.Learner Corpora

The corpus UniC (University-Corpus) is a Learner corpus, the data of which was collected as part of certain courses in the Department of Italian Language and Literature, with the participation of 120 students to date.

The Corpus was created by students in the second, third and fifth semesters of the department and consists of written essays (of different genres and levels). The texts were produced within the course, with no grade points for students, and treated only as a written activity. The learners are all adults between the ages of 18 and 42 years. Most of them are Greeks or have been residents of Greece for several years. Their level of foreign language learning, in the Italian language, is between B1+ to B2+ according to CEFR³. The size of the corpus is approximately 130,000 words to date.

From the above learner corpora, a specific textual genre was selected from which two sub-corpora were created: two compared Learner Corpora, collections of written texts produced by Italian language learners. They were named Unic.en and Unic.gr. The first corresponds to the written productions of students who have at least a B2 level in the English language, and the second corresponds to the texts of students for whom Italian is the first foreign language. Each of them has a size of approximately 20,000 words.

Narrative writing is a textual genre frequently assigned to students of the Department of Italian Language and Literature. In these specific courses, they are asked to produce texts of this kind either as practice in written expression or to acquire written material for linguistic analysis. These texts during the course can also be editable by the students themselves as samples for written language analysis. This analysis is done by the students themselves as part of exercises in NLP tools. The texts, in our case constituting the corpus, are in digital format, and the directive given to the students was to create a written narrative within the course with one of the two themes: a) *Racconta la memoria più bella o più brutta della tua vita.* b) *Un'esperienza personale che volete raccontare, using at least 500 words, and not having any help from reference tools, such as grammar books or dictionaries.* The composition of these essays was carried out either on personal computers or on the computers in our laboratory. Subsequently, students were required to submit their texts via the course platform (eClass NKUA). This process ensures that all texts, which will eventually be included in the Unic, are digitized and centralized on a single platform.

5.1.1 Learner Corpus Research

Between the two learner corpora (LC), there are similarities in the student parameters: a) they are in the same age group, as they are all adults and the maximum age is 42 years, b) they are all in the same educational environment and at the same educational phase, that is, at the university, c) they have the same level of proficiency in the Italian language with minor deviations, d) they have the same background regarding the first acquired language, which is Greek. Concerning the parameters of the two LCs, the similarities are twofold: a) they are two LCs with productions of the same text genre, that is, narrative writing, and b) the same instructions were given regarding the length and writing conditions of these productions for both groups of students.

³ <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>

The differences between the two groups are summarized in the research subject. The students of the Unic.gr group know only Greek and no other foreign language besides Italian, although some of them consider themselves false beginners due to their contact with English without having entered a learning environment. On the other hand, the students of the Univ.en group have learned English to at least a C1 level before learning Italian. The distribution of texts and words is as follows:

	UniC.gr	UniC.en
No of texts	30	19
No of words	19622	22320
Word/sentence	18.4	21.6

Table 1: An overview of the two corpora

In the above table, we also see a first indication that there is a difference between the two Corpora. The second corpus seems to contain longer sentences, a sign of greater comfort in writing.

5.1.2 Error analysis

The procedure followed is the one proposed in the international literature and was first formulated by Corder (1974). The steps in this model are a) Collection or selection of a sample of learner language (in this case a corpus of written language), b) Identification of errors, c) Description of errors which includes a grammatical analysis of each error and the sources, d) Explanation of different types of errors that is the ultimate object of error analysis, e) Evaluation of the errors that are collected.

For this study, it is already developed a Learner Corpus, as explained previously. To identify the errors in the two learner corpora, it is necessary to develop a two-level tagset, in order to describe the error as to its grammatical nature and at the same time attribute its type. The first level describes the part of speech in which the error is found:

Part of speech	tag
NOUN_SOSTANTIVO	SO
ADJECTIVE_AGGETTIVO	AG
ADVERB_AVVERBIO	AV
VERB_VERBO	VE
PROPOSITION_PREPOSIZIONE	PRE
PRONOUN_PRONOME (E PARTICELLA)	PRO
ARTICLE_ARTICOLO	AR
CONJUNCTION_CONGIUNZIONE	CO
PUNCTUATION_PUNTEGGIATURA	PUN

Table 2: the POS tag set

The second level describes the type of error, and the relevant tag follows that of the first level. There are several error typologies, for instance, Corder's (1974) typology points out that there are two types of errors which are usually committed by EFL learners: intralingual errors which are those errors which are committed due to the ignorance of rule restrictions, and

interlingual errors which are committed by the influence of learners' mother tongue. Richards' (1974) typology identified three types of errors: a) interference errors generated by L1 transfer; b) intralingual errors which result from the incorrect (incomplete or overgeneralized) application of language rules; and c) developmental errors caused by the construction of faulty hypotheses in L2, or Selinker's (1992) typology elaborated on the theory of interlanguage- in this study, a three-way typology was chosen that describes not the reason that caused the error, but the form of the error during the error detection.

Type of error	Tag
UNDERUSE_ASSENZA	ASS
REPLACEMENT_SOSTITUZIONE	SST
OVERUSE_ECCEZIONE	ECC
Other_ Altro	-

Table 3: the type of error tag set

5.2. The tools

The tools for analyzing the data in every step of the research (e.g., extracting word lists) are extremely necessary. The AntConc tool was used in this research, which is an NLP tool. The applications of NLP have increased in usage in recent years (Luriola et al., 2022). Various effective uses of NLP assist in educational environments, such as processing empirical data, processing learner corpora, or other linguistic analyses necessary for language teaching (Alhawiti, 2024). In the case of error analysis, a simple function of AntConc that can be used is the creation of concordances using the KWIC (Keyword in Context) function. This allows the researcher to easily see all the tagged concordances with a specific type of error or a specific part of speech in their entirety. This feature aids both in counting and in observing and interpreting errors later on. Another feature of the NLP tool is the Concordancer. In this study, the Voyant tool (Sinclair & Rockwell, 2016) and its concordancer were also used to improve the validity of the extracted data

6. RESULTS

Prior to delving into the identified error types and their categorization, a comparative analysis of the two Learner Corpora will be presented, focusing on total error count, readability, lexical density, and type/token ratio. All the data, apart from the number of errors, presented here are automatically retrieved by simply uploading the two corpora to the Voyant tool.

	UniC.gr	UniC.en
No of errors	364	241
Type/token ratio	21%	22%
Readability index	11.974	12.464
Vocabulary density	0.210	0.185

Table 4: basic info on both Corpora

As shown in the table, while the number of errors in Unic.gr is 50% higher than that of Unic.en, the type/token ratio and the readability index are slightly higher. However, the lexical density is higher for Unic.gr. One could argue that this comparison suggests that learners learning Italian as a second foreign language did so with slightly more accuracy. However, such a conclusion should be confirmed by the comparative analysis of the types of errors in each corpus.

Below is a distribution of errors according to the part of speech, as tagged and counted by the researcher, as well as by both the AntConc Concordancer and the Voyant tool Concordancer.

	Number of errors in UniC.gr	Number of errors in UniC.en
SO	33	10
AG	70	13
AV	1	-
VE	66	37
PRE	53	39
PRO	12	19
AR	23	21
CO	5	3
PUN	101	99
TOTAL	364	241

Table 5: Distribution of errors according to POS

Errors in nouns, verbs, prepositions, and adjectives are the ones that concern learners of the Italian language, especially those who have no prior knowledge of a foreign language. It is evident that content words do not pose a significant challenge for individuals with prior knowledge of English. This conclusion is supported by the comparatively low number of errors in nouns and adjectives. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the group of learners from the second learner corpus demonstrates superior performance in these areas, as indicated by their reduced error frequency. It is also evident that punctuation puzzles both groups of students, leading them to neglect its use. However, errors in Unic.en could provide insights into specific interference from English. The only category, where more errors are recorded in Unic.en than in Unic.gr is pronouns.

Regarding the use of functional words, such as articles or personal pronouns, we observed underuse and overuse, respectively, due to the differences of the English and the Italian language. Below is a table showing the distribution of errors in the three categories of the second level of errors (omission, overuse, and substitution) in pronouns and articles.

	ASS	ECC	SST
Unic.gr	4	1	7
Unic.en	3	10	6

Table 6: Distribution of errors according to type of error in pronouns

Upon closer analysis, we observe errors stemming from overuse, such as:

Io PRO ECC avevo molte cose da dire e io PRO ECC ero molto emozionato

(I had many things to say, and I was very emotional)

Trovo l'amore il maggiore bene nel mondo. Io PRO ECC personalmente lo voglio vivere

(I find love the greatest good in the world. I personally would like to live it.)

And some errors of substitution:

... vuoi che mi PRO SST prendo la responsabilità

(you want me to take responsibility)

Ma lei era un'amica di me PRO SST

(She was a friend of mine)

As for errors of omission, we observe an interference in another category of errors concerning articles. The following table reveals interesting differences between the two Corpora

	ASS	ECC	SST
Unic.gr	10	2	11
Unic.en	13	0	8

Table 7: Distribution of errors according to type of error in articles

In Uni.en there are tagged errors in phrases like the followings:

[I] AR ASS Genitori pensano in un modo altro

(Parents think in another way)

...non potevo, perchè [la]AR ASS connessione non era stabile..

(...I could not because connection was not always stable...)

7. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

This study sought to identify the differences in errors made by students of Italian language who possess prior knowledge of English and those who do not. Furthermore, it aimed to demonstrate interference stemming not from the students' mother tongue, but from their first foreign language. The findings of this research corroborate Nesselhauf's (2004) assertion that learner corpora facilitate the simultaneous investigation of various aspects, including broader questions such as the relative frequency of different error types. Specifically, the results indicated a positive interference from the first foreign language in the use of content words, such as nouns and adjectives, while revealing a negative interference in the use of certain pronouns and articles. It is already said, (Lopez, 2009) that transfer [...] do play a role in the learning of an L2 by adult people. Comparing learner corpora yields valuable insights for interlanguage analysis and offers examples of strategies that teachers can employ in teaching a second foreign language. In the context of this study, teachers can focus on identifying erroneous forms and predicting errors resulting from interference with the first foreign language. Knowledge of such language would have been particularly beneficial. In this regard, the construction of a class-made learner corpus/corpora offers advantages, as it is easy to build

and well-suited for studying learners' parameters by comparing them with corpus parameters and the types of errors they make. It appears that corpus linguistics, when applied in the classroom, also contributes to assessing learners' proficiency levels. However, the most valuable contribution of corpus studies lies in their potential to inform syllabus or task modifications. Teachers of a specific language (in this case, Italian in Greek tertiary education) should utilize the findings of such research to develop syllabuses or tasks tailored to students' needs and prior knowledge.

Following these conclusions, both types of learners can enhance their performance through classroom activities. The findings of the study can be used as examples of learners' errors that need correction in group or individual activities. Besides, to construct a good multiple-choice test, as already pointed by Corino and Marello (2009), it is necessary to identify the type of error on which to focus within a sentence produced by learners of Italian as a second language, which contains other errors as well. Furthermore, by examining Native Speakers corpora of the Italian language, students can observe the use of articles, pronouns, or other parts of speech, and compare them with their usage in the learner corpus. Another suggestion would be to analyze the same errors across different parts of speech using parallel corpora, such as mother tongue vs. foreign language (Greek-Italian) or first foreign language vs. second foreign language (English-Italian), in the classroom, and incorporate a reverse classroom lesson.

According to the findings of this study, Italian language curricula should seriously consider the potential prior knowledge of another foreign language. This factor can influence the quality of interlanguage, and the type of transfer or linguistic interference experienced by students of Italian. Indeed, as is customary with needs assessments, prior to Italian language courses, the knowledge of other foreign languages and which ones should be identified. Moreover, research such as this highlights the necessity of including this knowledge in various language needs assessment questionnaires.

In any case, whether from the perspective of the Italian language teacher or the student, errors can serve as an opportunity for the entire class to engage with a concept that is often considered taboo, and to overcome the obstacle that errors create in foreign language learning. Whether or not an error is due to prior knowledge of another foreign language, it provides a basis for discussion and raises awareness of multilingualism in our society, and consequently, in Italian language learning classrooms, among both students and teachers.

Further studies

While this type of research underscores the need for more extensive data to conclude, it also emphasizes the necessity for additional annotated corpora and researchers to facilitate this process. Also, tools must be developed which are suitable for learner data and are not reliant on manual tagging (Mendikoetxea, 2013). Furthermore, there is a pressing need for broader research encompassing mixed foreign language (FL) classes, including monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual students. Such research would yield more accurate and current insights into language interference in the Italian language, particularly in written speech.

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