

Interference in Composition: a Study on Written Essays by Portuguese Higher Education Learners

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Abstract

Higher education in Portugal suffered a deep transformation due to a new educational model introduced by the Bologna Process. This European guideline also fostered internationalization and the exchange of students and lecturers. As a result, a common communication language was imperative and English became a required course unit within higher education programs. In some institutions, English was already included while in others it was introduced in the new study plans. Considering that these students are adults and that many have low skills in English language, interference of the mother tongue, Portuguese, is recurrent. Based on a written essay with the topic “Write about the person who has influenced you the most”, a list of examples of different types of interference was collected. False friends appeared as one of the most significant types, therefore becoming the first focus of research due to potentially leading to misunderstandings in cross-linguistic communication (Chamizo Domínguez & Nerlich, 2002). As studies on interference are scarce in Portugal, we aim to develop a project on this matter, thus opening up new possibilities for research, contributing to educators’ awareness and proposing new methodologies towards a rethinking of teaching and learning English as a second language within higher education.

Keywords: Language Interference, ESL, Higher Education

Introduction

In 2006, European higher education went through a deep transformation as a result of the signing and implementation of the Bologna Process. In Portugal, this led to changes in terms of course structure, programs, syllabi and the concept of higher education. Among these, we may mention the restructuring of four-year and five-year undergraduate degree programs into three-year ones; of four-year master programs into two-year ones and the implementation of five-year PhDs.

Bologna also fostered internationalization of both institutions and learners through the creation of a European Higher Education Area and the promotion of mobility and exchange of knowledge. Within this scope, English has become a crucial tool to the pursuit of these goals and has therefore been included in many university programs as a significant course unit, regardless of the scientific area of programs.

The student population in private Portuguese universities encompasses not only those learners who access higher education right after the completion of secondary school but a huge number of adult learners who attend university while working, some of who have little or no knowledge of English. Moreover, the student population also includes learners from different nationalities, mainly from Portuguese speaking countries (Angolan, Cape Verdean, Brazilian, and so on) but also from Eastern European

countries (Ukraine and Romania, for example), besides other nationalities (for example, students in exchange programs). This has impacted on the strategies, teaching approaches and methodologies used in class. Furthermore, this has led to the need of restructuring course contents in order to provide students with both the basic linguistic skills to communicate in English as well as vocabulary and structures of their specific area of studies.

Considering that six years have passed since the implementation of the Bologna Process and the introduction of English as a Second Language (ESL) in various undergraduate degree programs, two researchers from different private higher education institutions (HEI) decided to investigate some of the possible implications of these changes in their students' language learning process. This study therefore arises from the exchange of ideas and concerns gearing towards the understanding of learners' difficulties and the development of adequate teaching and learning strategies.

Literature Review

Many studies have been conducted on the issue of interference, as this is a major concern for second language teachers and educational psychology professionals, just to mention two. Therefore, we could list a series of studies from the 1960s up to now on this matter. However, our purpose is to evidence the role of interference, and in particular, that of lexical interference in the written production of adult students in private HEIs in Portugal.

As far as false friends are concerned, though there are several studies on this subject contrasting English with Spanish, French and German, for example, there is very little research on false friends in Portuguese and English.

a) Interference

Second language learners (L2) base their production in the foreign language on their mother tongue (L1). The more distant the two are, the higher the occurrence of errors in L2 due to interference (Dechert, 1983; Ellis, 1997). In fact, when starting to learn a language, students often believe there is an equivalent in L2 for each word in L1 (Blum-Kulka & Levenston, 1983). The concept of interference has been used to describe "an interaction or a change in linguistic structures and structural elements" (Lekova, 2010) due to the influence of L1 in L2.

Considering that learning a second language represents a greater challenge for adult learners, the occurrence of interference becomes more likely to appear. This further justifies the significance of our research which, as previously mentioned, is based on results produced by this category of students.

b) False friends

Literature on false friends typically begins by differentiating between cognates and false friends, stating that the first are "words that have similar spelling and meaning in the two languages [and] help with vocabulary expansion and with reading comprehension" and the latter are "pairs of words that appear similar, but have different meaning in some or all contexts" (Inkpen, Frunza, & Kondrak, n.d.) False friends also are referred to in connection with metonymy, metaphors and euphemisms, among others, which evidences its importance in language, not only morphologically but also semantically, phonologically and syntactically speaking.

Chamizo Domínguez & Nerlich (2002) distinguish between chance false friends and semantic false friends, declaring that chance false friends are words that have similar spelling and/or pronunciation but a completely different etymology and meaning in the

two languages; semantic false friends, on the other hand, although having similar spelling and/or pronunciation, share etymological roots but have different meanings in the different languages.

Our study focuses on semantic false friends, as students typically resort to words in L2 which are similar in terms of spelling to L1, and these words commonly share etymological roots in English and Portuguese, though they have acquired different meanings.

Methods

Throughout the semester, students are regularly required to hand in written assignments on different subjects. When preparing this study, the choice of the written assignment became crucial, as there was the need to propose a theme that students could relate to and not feel the need to conduct any type of (online) research that might influence their language production. Thus, the topic “Write about the person who has influenced you the most” presented both a challenge in terms of language structure (the use of present perfect, a verb tense Portuguese students find confusing) as well as a personal appeal that would make it more engaging for them.

The population consisted of students from two private HEI in Lisbon, each group including participants from several areas of study. In one of the HEI, the paper was submitted online, via an elearning platform (Moodle); in the other, it was handed in in person. No selection was made of participants – all students attending English in the second semester of 2011/2012 within the researchers’ classes were asked to perform the task.

After collecting all the essays, researchers began analyzing the data so as to fill in a grid they had previously prepared. This grid included expected instances of interference based on literature on this subject and on the researchers’ teaching experience. Nevertheless, there was an agreed openness to any new type of interference that would appear in the essays and, in fact, a subcategory (in italics) was added to the grid below.

spelling	false friends	syntax				articles	(dependent) prep
		questions	negatives	word order	<i>sentence struct.</i>		

Upon completion of the grid, and as expected, the interference in terms of false friends was the most relevant, which is why we have selected it as the focus of this paper.

Findings

From what has been stated, it becomes clear that language learning results in and from a cultural encounter. Our study focuses on full semantic false friends, i.e, words that share the same etymological origin but with no overlap in meaning (Broz, 2008, 200). It is important to mention that we have started this project with no preconceived notions as to what types of false friends would be most likely to occur. This shows our neutral position as researchers and further supports the idea that the language learning process reflects what could be considered as a natural blending of meanings. Subsequently, our research is structured upon the Saussurean approach to language, validating the implications of “meaning” as a social and cultural construct inherent to communication. We have selected the most relevant examples from the extensive list of false friends found in our students’ compositions. The considerable number of such occurrences further supports the importance of taking the concept of “meaning” as crucial in language learning processes.

The following examples belong to two distinct grammar categories: verbs and nouns. Within such, a further subdivision could be interpreted, as some occurrences mirror errors caused by phonological and graphic similarities between words / expressions with distinct meanings in L1 and L2, while others result from word for word translation. In the first category, some relevant examples are:

Verbs:

"to import" instead of **"to mind"**. The Portuguese verb "importar-se" means "to mind".

Ex. "I don't *import* if you're late" ("I don't mind if you're late")

Portuguese translation: "Eu não me *importo* se te atrasares."

"to create children" instead of **"to raise"**. In Portuguese, to raise children is translated to "criar filhos"

Ex. "My mother *created* four children" ("My mother raised four children")

Portuguese translation: "A minha mãe *criou* quatro filhos"

"to precise" instead of **"to need"**. "To need" is "precisar" in Portuguese.

Ex. "I *precise* a nap" ("I need a nap")

Portuguese translation: "Preciso de uma sesta."

Nouns:

"defects" (**"flaws"**). The Portuguese noun for "flaws" is "defeitos"

Ex.: "She has many *defects*" ("She has many flaws")

Portuguese translation: "Ela tem muitos *defeitos*".

"just" (**"fair"**). In Portuguese "fair" means "justo"

Ex.: "I was a *just* decision" ("It was a fair decision")

Portuguese translation: "Foi uma decisão *justa*"

"attacks" (**"seizures"**). "Seizures" means "ataques" in Portuguese

Ex. "He had a(n) *attack*" ("He had a seizure")

Portuguese translation: "Ele teve um *ataque*."

Notice that often times students neglect the rule pertaining to the use of indefinite articles when preceding a noun that starts by a vowel. "A attack" occurs much more frequently than the alternative "an attack". This further supports the presence of linguistic interference, since this rule is not applicable to Portuguese.

For the second subcategory, errors in meaning resulting from word for word translation, we point out the following:

Verbs:

"to have 16 years" (**"to be 16 years old"**)

Ex. "I have 16 years" ("I am 16 years old")

Portuguese translation: "Eu tenho 16 anos"

The word "old" does not have a Portuguese equivalent in this context. Students have therefore omitted it.

"to have sure" (**"to be sure"**)

Ex.: "I have sure of that" ("I am sure of that")

Portuguese translation: "Eu tenho a certeza disso"

The verb "to have" and the verb "to be" are often misused by Portuguese students of English. Similarly, Anglophone students of Portuguese often find it challenging to distinguish between "ser" ("Eu sou um estudante" / "I am a student") and "estar" (Eu estou doente" / "I am ill"), as in English the same verb –to be– applies.

Nouns:**“fathers” (“parents”)**

Ex. “My fathers are at home” (“My parents are at home”)

Portuguese translation: “Os meus pais estão em casa”

In Portuguese “father” means “pai”. The plural form “pais” stands for the English word “parents.”

The next three examples are not of words but of phrases. In fact, they are direct translations of Portuguese idioms, further demonstrating the interference of L1 in L2:

“Drop the arms” (give up)

Ex. “She never dropped her arms” (“She never gave up”)

Portuguese translation: “Ela nunca baixou os braços”

In Portuguese “drop your arms” means “give up, throw in the towel”. Students, in their learning process, assumed there was not only a word for word equivalence in the two languages (Blum-Kulka) but an equivalence in terms of idioms.

“run out the problem” (avoid the problem)

Ex. “He just ran out the problem” (“He just avoided the problem”)

Portuguese translation: “Ele fugiu do problema”

In Portuguese “to avoid a problem” means “fugir do problema” (run away from the problem). Though students used “run out” rather than “run away”, the metaphorical meaning of the idiom in Portuguese remains - the idea of leaving the problem behind.

“round the situation” (avoid the situation)

Ex. “They round the situation” (“They avoid the situation”)

Portuguese translation: “Eles contornaram a situação”

“Avoiding a situation” is expressed in Portuguese by “contornar uma situação”, which means “going around the situation”. In this case, students used a preposition “round” as a verb to convey the idiom.

Discussion and Conclusion

In language teaching and learning, student errors are an important source of information for understanding the learning process and devising knowledge acquisition strategies. As a matter of fact, error analysis has come to be an efficient means to analyze and understand error production by L2 learners who, in an attempt to fill the gaps in their L2 structures, resort to their knowledge of L1, thus leading to L1 interference in L2.

This paper essentially concerns lexical interference by adult learners. In our assessment of texts produced by the study participants, we have concluded that instances of interference were mostly lexical, primarily reflecting the difficulty to separate false friends in Portuguese and English. We aim to 1) raise awareness to the phenomenon of interference in ESL, particularly, at HEIs; 2) reflect on the importance of viewing errors as possibilities for not only acquitting knowledge but also, and consequently, developing innovative teaching strategies.

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