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A Collaborative Action Research on Teaching Writing to the Spanish Speaking Equatorial Guinea Students of an Efl Class at a Malaysian University College

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ARTICLE DETAILS	ABSTRACT
History <i>Revised format: May 2019</i> <i>Available Online: June 2019</i>	<p>Out of the four universal language skills, writing is the most reliable instrument for assessing one's proficiency in a foreign language due to its challenge of production with a scope of reflection. So the writing samples of a learner can be a rich source of understanding their error patterns not only of performance but also of competence. The error patterns may be due to a first or second language interruption as well as the learners' different worldviews, cultural/ethnic features and individual characteristics. However, the aim of this study is to look into the typical mistake patterns in Spanish speaking trilingual students' English writing. It is based on the performance of a group of students from Equatorial Guinea with Spanish as their first or second language. Their essay samples in an English Communication course of a Malaysian university college are analysed and correlated with the consequent interviews with them. The paper identifies the respective weaknesses to be overhauled and strengths to be utilized in teaching writing to the Spanish speaking trilingual English language learners.</p>
Keywords <i>Spanish Learners of English, Equatorial Guinea, Error Analysis, Teaching Writing</i>	
JEL Classification: <i>I21, I22</i>	

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1. Introduction

Due to its "reflective space and production challenge" (Al Mahmud, Shamala and Suparna, 2018), writing is the main instrument of diagnosing one's competence in a foreign language. So the English writing samples can be a rich source of understanding the difficulties and error patterns of a group of EFL /ESL students, such as the trilingual/multilingual learners of the Central African country Equatorial Guinea (EG). The researchers in this study find such students to be a unique group of English learners away from home.

There are certain things common to teaching all four skills, such as teachers' adequate knowledge of what and how to teach. Accordingly, teachers of English writing need to have adequate knowledge of ELT to be able to make their lessons interesting and love their jobs because "Teaching techniques and teachers' personalities can certainly affect the attitudes and motivation of students..." (Gardner & Lambert 1972, p. 37). There are two major approaches to developing writing skills: Product approach and Process approach (Nunan 1991). The primary

concern of the product approach is grammatical accuracy and this is mainly restricted to discrete sentences. This approach suggests that grammatical accuracy will ultimately lead to good writing. On the other hand, the main aim of the process approach is to develop writing fluency in the learners without caring much about grammatical accuracy.

Like other skills, in L2 learners' written scripts, usually, two different features are present, mistakes and errors. Brown (2000) defines 'mistake' as a performance error which is a failure to follow a known structure properly, which can be self-corrected. It is inevitable that learners make mistakes in the process of foreign language learning. The question is why students go on making the same mistakes even when such mistakes have been repeatedly pointed out to them. The inquiry is more intriguing for English teachers such as the researchers in this study, when the learner group is a special one, such as the Spanish speaking students of Equatorial Guinea learning English as an L3 (third language) in a third country (Malaysia).

1.1 Equatorial Guinea's Trilingual Learners of English

Equatorial Guinea is a Central African country with a history of colonization first by Portuguese explorers and later by Spanish colonizers. It gained independence from Spain in 1968. The people of Equatorial Guinea are mostly of Bantu origin. The inhabitants of the northern part of the country speak Fang-Ntumu, while those in the south speak Fang-Okah. The two dialects have differences but are mutually intelligible. The Bubi, who constitute 15% of the population, are indigenous to Bioko Island of Equatorial Guinea. Spanish and French are the official languages of Equatorial Guinea. Spanish has been an official language since 1844, and is still the language of education and administration. 67.6% of Equatorial Guineans, particularly the urban people, can speak the language. EG people's first contact with English was mainly through the Pidgin English of Portuguese and Spanish colonizers.

English teachers in Malaysia and elsewhere are more or less influenced by the homogeneous views about learning in general and language acquisition in particular. This may obscure the philosophical and cognitive differences of European and African learners from the popular notions in ELT practices. Like every other great community, central African students of Equatorial Guinea have to be understood in terms of their sociocultural and sociolinguistic features that have a link with their individual learning styles and processes. EG students are a collective community due to their tribal identities and the common religious belief in Catholic Christianity (93%). This may have determined not only their worldviews and norms of behaviour but also the probable modes of learning. The findings below may shed light on EG students' linguistic situation the way of thinking that may have impact upon their learning orientation and their writing in EFL classes.

- **Trilingual situation:** All EG learners of English have a trilingual situation because in the background they have an indigenous mother tongue (e.g. Bube, Fang, Benga, Ndowe) and are proficient in Spanish as their second language and the language of their schooling throughout all the years of education.
- **Spanish as the basis of learning English:** As it is clear to the EG students that their indigenous languages come of a completely different origin, when learning English they use Spanish, another European language, as the basis of their linguistic transfer.
- **Fast and competent learner:** As bilingual and multilinguals generally are, the EG students are smarter in linguistic transfer due to their better cognitive proficiency (Cummins, 2007) and faster in learning English. They are likely to have more conscious learning than unconscious acquisition of English due to their conscious comparison of English with Spanish.
- **Verb versus noun:** These basic differences in perspective are apparent even in the languages. In the African indigenous languages, the verb system is the key to meaning and the Africans "do it" with verbs. In Western languages, "nouns and adjectives are most important. In this "format" we have a noun, representing a thing; then we describe it (Jenkins, 1991).
- **Stative versus aggressive:** Why something happens is not as important as the fact that it has occurred. This is why, Europeans, particularly Americans of European origin, appear aggressive to the Africans. Their manner, their way of relating and talking – they all look strange to Africans.
- **Mixed style:** Like other Africans, EG students' minds also accept logic but not necessarily in the same cause-and-effect manner as inherent in the Anglo-American convention of writing. They rather use imagination and tend to express in a narrative style and a spiral continuity of ideas, information and personal experience of things in their writings. They do not differentiate the writings by such hard and fast rule of formal and informal.

1.2 Spanish Language versus the English Language

Spanish descended from Latin and belongs to the Romance branch of Indo-European language family. It is one of the six official languages of the United Nations. Equatorial Guinea is the only African country with Spanish as the official and educational language like many Latin American countries. In spite of both being European languages and belonging to the same major language family, the Spanish and English languages have the following differences for teachers/learners of English to note.

- **Scripts:** The Spanish language is written in the Spanish alphabet, which is the addition of one letter, *eñe* (*ñ*), to the Latin alphabet. While there are many similarities between the Spanish and English consonant systems, the differences between the vowel systems and sentence stress present significant difficulties for English learners.
- **Spelling:** Like Bahasa Malay, there is a strong correspondence between the sound of a word and its spelling in Spanish. The irregularity of English causes problems when Spanish learners write a word they first encounter in spoken language and the vice versa. A specific problem concerns the spelling of English words with double letters. Spanish has only 3 double-letter combinations- *cc*, *ll*, *rr*. English, in comparison, has 5 times as many. "Spanish learners often reduce English double letters to a single one, or overcompensate by doubling a letter unnecessarily" (Coe, 1987, p.99).
- **Grammar Highlights:** There are grammatical differences between the two languages that may cause learning difficulty. For instance, a native Spanish speaker may say "I have 43 years," because the verb used for expressing age in Spanish is translated to the English verb *have*. Some other differences are, for instance, in their verb systems, word order, use of articles, and use of auxiliary verbs.

2. The Study Objectives and Method

Every effort and step to learn something new is complimented by slips and error. We practice to make things perfect. Similarly, the language learning process is incomplete without errors and mistakes. Erdogan (2005) opines that mistakes are unavoidable in the process of learning a second/foreign language. Educators can use the errors made by the students to reflect on their teaching and understand the learning behaviour of the students. It is claimed that the partial similarities between such two languages as Spanish and English rather cause learning difficulties (Ulla Connor, 1996). So, instead of transfer analysis, analysing the error patterns in a target language separately and then finding their links with the mother tongue background, cultural/ethnic origin and individual features may contribute more (Ellis, 1994).

The aim of this study is not to find more or novel reasons but to get to the common error/mistake patterns of Spanish speaking EFL learners of Equatorial Guinea, which can help an English teacher of writing. Whether a learner deviation in writing is an error (inherent in a student's understanding/knowledge) or mistake (occurring due to performance barriers and possible to be self-corrected) is rather secondary for this study. Our target is to look at the frequency and intensity of errors/mistakes and highlight them for ELT practitioners. With a process approach in mind, we attempt to see these patterns at two levels: Word level and Sentence level. So, the research questions of this study are two, which also determine the objectives accordingly:

- a) What are the common error patterns of Spanish speaking students' English essay writing at the word level?
- b) What are the common error patterns of Spanish speaking students' English essay writing at the sentence level?

We chose the simple method of textual-grammatical analysis of the writing samples (Essays and sentences) of a group of Equatorial Guinea students of an English enhancement class in a Malaysian university college. Ten samples have been selected for thorough analysis of the word level mistakes such as verb forms, improper tense and spelling and the sentence level mistakes such as word order, collocation, and subject verb agreement. Two samples were collected from the same ten students, one at the beginning and one at the end of the course to find out the change of error patterns. First, the write-ups were checked in details for word and sentence level mistakes. Then the students have been informally interviewed based on their mistakes for a better understanding of their perspective on the occurrence of the mistakes. The mistakes have been counted for their frequency and intensity.

3. Analysis and Discussion

The tables in the following sections show the summary reports of error analysis at word, and sentence levels as found in Spanish speaking students of the aforementioned class. The reports present a comparative picture of their

writing performance at all levels before and after taking the English enhancement course so that the generalizations can be made about the persisting error patterns. The result highlights are elaborated below.

3.1 Word Level Problems

As the tables 1-2 suggest, a vast majority of EG English learners have word-level problems in English writing. However, they are fast learners as can be evidenced by the reduced number of mistake doers after taking the English class with explicit notification of the problems. In addition, the mistake frequency too has decreased after a learning session of about two months from 60% to 45% in verb/tense forms and 65% to 35% in spelling. Spanish speaking students generally have legible -if not so beautiful- handwriting perhaps due to their familiar ground language - Spanish- using the same Roman alphabet of English. Spelling mistakes seem to be largely due to substituting the Spanish spelling for English vowel sounds, writing a word the way they pronounce (“tree” instead of “three”), or over generalizing newly learned spelling patterns (e.g. applying the ending “-ck” incorrectly in the word “speack”), or following Spanish capitalization rules that do not require days of the week and languages to be spelled with the initial letter in uppercase. Errors related to verbs are mainly the improper use of verbs and/or tense in sentences like the following for instance:

- a) We -- from Equatorial Guinea. (We are from Equatorial Guinea.)
- b) I go home last week. (I went home last week.)
- c) He -- coming to class. (He is coming to class.)

What is to be noted overall, even after taking intensive English proficiency courses the two types of mistakes/errors reported in this study have persisted with little change in frequency but not in their nature. This is where such studies are useful for practicing teachers.

Table 1: Summary of word-level errors of Spanish speaking EG students before and after English courses

No.	Type of Error	Word Level (Before)		Word Level (After)	
		Number of Students Doing it	Average Frequency of Error (%)	Number of Students Doing it	Average Frequency of Error (%)
1	Improper verb and tense forms	9 of 10	60%	6 of 10	45%
2	Spelling	10 of 10	65%	5 of 10	35%

Table 2: Reasons and examples of word-level errors of Spanish speaking EG learners

Word Level (Before & After)			
No.	Type of Error	Reasons/Explanation of Errors	Examples of Errors
1	Improper verb and tense forms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Different verb system in Spanish • No auxiliary verb in Spanish • Verbs that are irregular in the past tense are problematic because they must be memorized, even though the present continuous is formed the same way in English as in Spanish. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We __ from Equatorial Guinea. - I go home last week. - He __ coming to class.
2	Spelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Substituting the Spanish spelling for English vowel sounds • Over generalizing the “s” of plural. • Over generalizing newly learned spelling patterns • Following L1 capitalization rules 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I need speack more inglish. - School is tree hours. - The womans go to Kuala Lumpur and injoy Genting Hilan sunday.

3.2 Sentence Level Problems

At the sentence level, interestingly mistake frequency in word order has been reduced from 65% to 25%. This may be due to the Spanish language having a similar-to-English word order of the main elements in a sentence (i.e. Subject-Verb-Object/SVO). However, different word orders of Spanish for the noun-adjective (i.e. noun followed

by adjective) persists in many students, for example in sentences like ‘I like food Arab (...Arab food). Spanish syntax is generally more flexible than English syntax, which leads EG learners to use awkward sentence structures. So we find sentences like:

- You not like the food Malaysia?
- Today is a day it is raining and we sleep.
- I was all day weekend outside

Parts of speech seem to be another problem that persists with a slight change of frequency after English classes. The main difficulties are found to be in the change of parts of speech according to their function, for example in ‘Do not long your class’ (...lengthen).

Subject-verb agreement problems are due to the fact that Spanish verb conjugation is the same for the subjects “you”, “he”, and “she”, whereas in English an –s must be added to the ending for “he,” “she” and “it”. The mistakes in the use of articles have been because in the Spanish language nouns can be without an article or proper nouns too can be used with the definite article. For example, in English, one must say, “I am a teacher,” but the Spanish equivalent translates literally as “I am teacher.” Use of the auxiliary verb “do” is difficult to acquire because there is not an equivalent Spanish word used in forming questions or in making negative statements. So while making questions and negatives, sentences have been found such as:

- __ You like do homework? (Do you like to homework?)
- I __ no like potato chips. (I do not like potato chips.)

Table 3: Summary of sentence-level errors of Spanish speaking EG students before and after English courses

	Type of Error	Sentence Level (Before)		Sentence Level (After)	
		Number of Students Doing it	Average Frequency of Error (%)	Number of Students Doing it	Average Frequency of Error (%)
1	Word order	6 of 10	65%	3 of 10	25%
2	Improper word (Wrong collocation)	7 of 10	55%	6 of 10	35%
3	Parts of Speech	5 of 10	33%	2 of 10	10%
4	SV agreement	6 of 10	57%	4 of 10	30%
5	Use of Articles (omitted or inserted)	7 of 10	65%	4 of 10	25%
6	Use of Prepositions (incorrect or omitted)	7 of 10	45%	4 of 10	30%
7	Auxiliary Verbs (missing)	8 of 10	43%	5 of 10	20%
8	Double Negative	6 of 10	57%	3 of 10	30%

Table 4: Reasons and examples of sentence-level errors of Spanish speaking EG learners

Sentence Level (Before & After)			
	Type of Error	Reasons/Explanation of Errors	Examples of Errors
1	Word order	Adjectives come after nouns in Spanish, which causes this reversed order.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - You not like the food Malaysia? - Today is a day it is raining and we sleep. - I like food Arab. - I was all day weekend

			outside.
2	Improper word (Wrong collocation)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfamiliar with English expressions • “Much” and “many” is essentially interchangeable in Spanish 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - So much students go to the lobby. - I have 28 years.
3	Parts of Speech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trouble in conversion from one part of speech to another • Problem in using superlative-comparative and prepositions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “Please do not long your class” “more better”
4	SV agreement	Spanish verb conjugation is the same for the subjects.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My friend come to class everyday. - My mother go the church every sunday.
5	Use of Articles (omitted or inserted)	In Spanish nouns can be without an article or proper nouns too can be used with the definite article.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My father is _ engineer in _big company. - We must go to the Tesco.
6	Use of Prepositions (incorrect or omitted)	Prepositions are very tricky as well, especially since the Spanish preposition “en” can be translated as “in” or “on”.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My uncle is in home now. - The sons of my uncle go _ the basketball court for play basketball. - Come at class.
7	Auxiliary Verbs (missing)	The auxiliary verb “do” is difficult to acquire because there is no equivalent of it in Spanish in forming questions or in making negative statements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - _ You like do homework? - I _ no like potato chips.
8	Double Negative	Double negative is not wrong in Spanish grammar.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - My teacher no give me nothing last class.

4. Implication and Conclusion

Spanish speaking EG learners’ error patterns and the tendencies in their English essay writing as discovered in this study are worth organized reflection. We cannot just discard them as deviations. Both students and teachers should have a rational attitude towards this phenomenon. Through this study, we understand that L1 or a language used as a postulation ground for learning a next language (such as the case of EG learners depending on Spanish which is their second language for learning English) cannot be rejected totally in SLA classroom. The positive transfer in case of Spanish is particularly true about the writing systems and the Spanish-English cognates or similar words. Following are some more specific implications of this study for teachers of English writing:

- As Spanish uses the same Roman alphabet of English with little phonological variation, it is particularly helpful to provide lessons on spelling and pronunciation with explicit comparisons in a list of relevant words.
- Comparison with the ground language (Spanish in this case) can be integrated into ESL lessons for EG learners of English so that the teachers can better anticipate what errors might be made and repeated and the learners can “self-monitor” their use of English.
- Teachers of English writing need to know how to utilize positive transfer by showing probable similarities between English and Spanish and partially or judiciously allowing students to use Spanish for the convenience of idea generation.
- Visual aids featuring common English errors with their correct usage could be created to display in the classroom. Students may be asked to make flashcards with the correct usage for practice.
- Teachers (with some knowledge of the Spanish language) can reduce negative transfer or mother tongue interference by clarifying the differences between the two languages or simply clarifying English sentence structure and other things by showing examples.
- Narrative portions in Spanish speaking students’ write-ups can be maintained in the form of examples to elaborate the supporting points in an essay.

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