

# Research paper

## Interlanguage or Technology when Using English as a Vehicular Language: what influences students productions online?

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### Abstract

This article seeks to explore what influences the production of accurate online written texts in English by speakers of Spanish. In order to do so, the cases where the pronoun "I" is not capitalized have been examined in detail to determine whether we are facing an error due to a lack of proficiency or whether the use of ICT is to blame. After going through the cases of "i" and observing the other mistakes made in the texts where they appear, ICT together with lack of proofreading, and interlanguage seem to be the possible answers. Although we can establish the use of technology and, therefore, Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) as the cause of most cases in analogy with what happens with native speakers, further investigation is needed and new research with similar control groups where explicit corrective feedback is given could give us more clues about the behaviour of the participants.

**Keywords:** Interlanguage, English as a vehicular language, ICT, proofreading, corrective feedback.

### 1. Introduction

Now that the use of technology in teaching is a fact, teachers must deal with an added problem: the mediation of a machine when the student writes. At first sight, this may not seem important, but, in fact, it is so. Before the arrival of computers and the internet, the student relied on a pen when doing written tasks. Since computers came to the scene, text processors are in charge of most proofreading and any badly written word is immediately underlined. Even though useful and timesaving, autocorrected texts imply that students skip a step and spelling and grammar are left to the criteria and expertise of the program. Students are so used to that process that they rarely revise their texts the old way, dictionary in hand. However, when doing online tasks, the support of the word processor disappears, and the students just rely on the tips of their fingers. The result is an apparently careless text, which darkens the quality of the written production leaving a possible good content hidden behind poor grammar and punctuation. Now, let us include another factor: the use of a foreign language (FL). When learners of a foreign language use it as a vehicular language in the classroom, they are expected to make mistakes due to their lack of proficiency. The interlanguage theory (Selinker, 1972; 1992) plays an important role in the written productions of speakers of a FL and this is reflected in the way they combine their knowledge about the FL grammar and vocabulary and what they know about their L1 that can fit in the new paradigm. The problem is that, sometimes, technology and language learning influence written production in the same areas to such an extent that it is difficult to discern the real cause of the interference.

This paper analyses the influence of both interlanguage and technology in Spanish speakers of English as a FL taking as an example the lack of capitalization of 'I'. After

observing an online learner corpus, some participants seem to have problems capitalizing this pronoun. This, prior to further observation, seems to be an example of the influence of the students' L1. However, the fact that these are written productions in an online forum, the role of Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) turns out to be decisive for a better understanding of the failure. Thus, it is necessary to revise the concepts of interlanguage and error analysis and add the variable of information and communication technology (ICT). After a preliminary study on the topic (Torrado-Cespón & Font-Paz, 2016), the authors concluded that further research on the topic was necessary with a more detailed analysis of the cases.

## **2. Objectives**

The objective of this paper is to analyse the online written productions of university students who do not capitalize the first person singular pronoun and to find a solution to prevent it. As a consequence, highlights the need to advise students to pay attention to their output when writing online. To do so, it is necessary to evaluate the two different factors that influence the written productions of these students. First, the role of interlanguage (Selinker, 1972; 1992) as a common cause of learners' errors while the learning process has not finished and, on the other hand, the use of ICT as a medium. So, as the English first-person singular pronoun does not follow the same rules as in the first languages the subjects in this corpus use on a daily basis (Basque, Catalan, Galician or Spanish), both factors are to bear in mind when writing online without a word processor. The results can offer us, as teachers, some considerations about the possible solutions we can offer in the classroom or, as is the case when the FL is the vehicular language of the subject, when ICT enters the scene.

## **3. Literature review**

The role of error analysis is really important when teachers want to categorize the types of failures students commit. Through this analysis, they can observe thoroughly the strategies and the patterns used by students and, thus, help them to fix the problems they may have when writing in the FL (Erdogan, 2005, p. 269). When the students start to express themselves fluently in the new language, it is important not to overcorrect their production in order to avoid demotivating them. Teachers must never forget that their role is that of facilitating learning, not placing obstacles which can delay it. They can never forget that errors are a natural part of the learning process (Corder, 1981, p. 25). Therefore, dealing properly with the errors and mistakes is an important part of language instruction. Sometimes, the teacher needs to be explicit about the failure. However, there are instances where the error is self-corrected with enough correct exposure to the target language (TL). Error analysis is a particularly useful mechanism when we, as teachers, want to understand the mistakes our students make and be able to find a solution catered to the learning needs they may have. In addition, sharing error analysis results with other professionals involves the creation of an ever-growing source of possible solutions for common learning problems we can face in the classroom in a given moment. Error analysis becomes, therefore, a tool that not only helps the students of a particular teacher in a given country and level, but a set of ideas any FL or SL teacher around the world can extrapolate to her/his actual case.

In the sample used for this research, where we are dealing with the use of the FL language in a subject where it is not being taught but used as a vehicular language, students feel more relaxed and, sometimes, forget about the correctness and the attention they would pay in the case of a specific foreign language class. In this study, the teacher is also dealing with online instruction, plus the particular character of a forum, which is supposed to be nearer informal spoken language than to formal written language. Even though the example used suggests interlanguage (Selinker, 1972; 1992) as the main source of errors when students use the FL as a vehicular language, sometimes the teacher must pay attention to other factors influencing production. Consequently, it is necessary to revise the concepts that may influence this type of written production, namely, interlanguage and ICT. After doing so, it is interesting to assess the relevance of given corrective feedback to these students as a way of preventing them from repeating the same mistake.

### *3.1. Learners and interlanguage*

Interlanguage failures are characterized by the misuse of the language due to the influence of the speaker's L1. These errors are part of the natural process of learning a language (Corder, 1981). At first glance, the non-capitalization of the pronoun 'I' in the written production of students whose L1 or L2 is not English can be considered as normal. The participants in these written productions share Spanish as a L1 or L2 and the first person singular pronoun does not need capitalization in this language. Thinking about the principles of interlanguage, the concept of interlanguage error makes sense. Thus, the students apply the same norms they have in Spanish as it makes sense and it does not affect the meaning they want to convey. However, although both languages use pronouns and all pronouns except this one do not need capitalization, the fact that it is a widely used pronoun and it is one of the first rules the students learn when teachers explain written English makes us doubt that interlanguage is the actual cause.

It has to be taken into account that learning a language once our L1 or L2 is well established is a conscious process. Theory tells us that learners will export from the L1 to the FL what makes sense as long as the process lasts (Lado, 1990; 1991, p. 15) and, therefore, they will make mistakes. Selinker (1992, p. 151) states that these mistakes are systematic and help learners to build hypotheses, as happens for example, in our L1 when we are children. These hypotheses, when they receive the correct feedback, are proved and amended by the speakers themselves when exposed to the proper amount of correct input. However, when the FL is learnt in adulthood or after puberty, learners will achieve similar proficiency with difficulty (Bever, 1981). The well-known theory of the critical period stated by Lenneberg (1967) also applies to L2 or FL acquisition or learning. Consequently, the older the student, the larger the number of mistakes. On the other hand, the older the learner, the more conscious the process is, so they are more aware of the rules governing the new language. The participants in this corpus have learnt English in different periods of their lives, so their production should be analysed in detail in order to discern whether interlanguage plays such an important role.

### *3.2. Writing and ICT*

In order to understand the role of ICT in writing, handwriting needs to be revised first. Handwriting is a rather complex task requiring one to one correspondence between the movement of our hand and the resulting shape. In order to achieve proficiency in handwriting, we practise since our first school days and we keep improving it until we reach adulthood. If not practised often, our handwriting decays. When typing on a keyboard the process is rather different. First, the subject recognises the character in the keyboard and then memorises its position, so s/he does not need to look at it when writing. Typewriting has more to do with visuomotor ability than visual recognition once it is established, it is less precise and makes the relationship between the input and output more abstract and disconnected (Velay & Longcamp, 2012, p. 371; Magen & Velay, 2014, p. 76). In fact, when teaching characters to any age group, recognition is easy if they have practised them using pen and paper before using a keyboard (Velay & Longcamp, 2012, p. 372). Therefore, when using ICT the writing system is simpler and less demanding in terms of processing.

When ICT enters the scene, the complex processes involved in handwriting is underestimated and the results are texts that do not follow either grammatical or typographical rules. The misuse of typography (lack of commas, multiple question marks and so on) is another way of giving texts an untidy aspect not suitable for an academic setting. This use of non-standard typography in ICT contributes largely to undermine literacy (Zelenkauskaite & Gonzales, 2017, p. 86). When looking specifically at capitalization, we find the studies of Wood et al (2014) in native English speakers. They noted how the use of either 'i' or 'I' was common in text messages. In fact, capitalization and punctuation inaccuracies were the most common in any age group (Wood et al., 2014).

The use of ICT influences both the written productions of native speakers and learners and, even though its nature is different, the resulting mistake can be the same as in a case of interlanguage influence. The language found in chats or other synchronous ways

of internet communication tends to be simple and abbreviated. Crystal (2004) noted that capitalization is often ignored in this type of conversation, even for 'I'. When analysing online fora, such as the corpus in this study, in an academic setting, the teacher expected to find more formal language. These forum posts are part of an academic subject where, even though perfect grammar is not the main objective, students have to show accurate written productions. However, mistakes are also present in this non-synchronic online communication giving, as a result, a careless appearance and undermining the real value of the task.

#### 4. Corrective feedback

When students commit errors (systematic failures) or mistakes (occasional wrong use) teachers must think about a way of solving it. It is necessary to state that mistakes cannot really be prevented in language use as they are not related to the learning process of the target language (Torrado-Cespón & Díaz-Lage, 2017). Therefore, teachers have to think about the most suitable way of making students aware of the incorrect forms in their written productions. Giving or not giving corrective feedback (CF) to learners is a complicated issue. First, let us consider using corrective feedback. An appropriate warning about what to correct seems to be useful from the point of view of the learner, as it states clearly where to direct attention. However, CF can be a double-edged sword, especially if it is explicit CF. Even though the student becomes undoubtedly aware of the mistake, the processing is minimal, so, in a long-term scenario, it can be negative (Ellis, 2008: 99). Indirect feedback seems to suit the actual needs of language learning. In the same way, student acquisition is better if the teacher uses negotiation of meaning instead of translation, indirect feedback is more effective in the analysis of written production as the processing is more demanding (Ellis, 2008: 100).

#### 5. Participants and data

The term under scrutiny in this paper is 'I'. In English, this term is always capitalized. However, some of the students involved in this study, and who provided written work for the corpus, seem to have forgotten this. The misuse of this pronoun due to an interlingual problem seems rather odd, as students are aware of this pronoun's characteristics since the very first moment they start learning written English.

The ENTERCOR corpus was compiled using the online forums from different subjects at Universidad Internacional de La Rioja and it is divided into two sub-corpora, TICOR and TRAINCOR, with a total of 470,088 word tokens. This study analysed the occurrences of the pronoun in the first sub-corpus. This sub-corpus is divided into two more components (Table 1). Both components collect posts from the compulsory forums of ICT Tools Applied to the Learning of English, a module from the English teaching specialty for pre-school education and primary education. In these fora, learners express their opinions regarding a topic suggested in the syllabus and debate it amongst themselves, with no intervention from the lecturer. The participants, males and females, are all over 18 and their level of English varies from B1 to C2.

Table 1. Sub-corpus TICOR.

	Component 1: ICT	Component 2: TIC	Corpus TICOR
Number of participants	155	511	620
Word types	4,816	9,320	14,136
Word tokens	107,042	317,759	367,790
Occurrences of 'I'	2,139	7,716	9,855
Occurrences of 'i'	18	157	175

The use of proper capitalization is something that not only worries the EFL teacher, it is a native speaker problem too, as observed by Wood, Kemp and Waldron (2014). We are dealing with a mistake that seems to be two-faced: the student does not know the English norm for capitalization of the first person singular pronoun or the student, in spite of being aware of the rule, does not apply it in a digital environment.

## 6. Method

The fact that such an error appears in a corpus that collects the written production of future English teachers can be considered as a clear indicator of the influence of CMC. If not, we have to face the fact that these students are still not ready to teach EFL. The non-capitalization appears in a relatively low number of participants, so their productions need deeper analysis. In order to do this, these specific productions were scrutinized according to two groups of variables: *technology to blame* and *lack of proficiency*. The variables are the following:

- Technology to blame:
  - Misspellings due to proximity: some words are spelled wrong because the character used appears next to the correct one in the keyboard: 495TOENTICA *ususally*
  - Missing spaces: the student forgets to press the space bar after a full stop, comma and other punctuation signs or between words: 69TOENICTB *teacheasier*
  - Non-capitalization sentence initial: the student forgets to press the caps lock. 183TOENICTB *what* do you think about it?
  - Non-capitalization of proper names: 32TOENICTA videos about *muzzy*
- Lack of proficiency:
  - Misspellings due to lack of awareness: 509TOENICTB *evalluating*
  - No verb marks: either past, participle or third person singular present: 40TOENICTB each situation *require us*
  - Ungrammatical constructions: from direct translation of Spanish expressions to sentences which make no sense. 495TOENTICA *So we, like a teachers need to do curses*

After taking a look at the productions, a new variable seems to be necessary for a deeper understanding, the non-capitalization of words which differ from the students' L1. This cannot be included in either of the groups as it presents a similar error as in the case of "I". It is also important to check whether the participant capitalizes the pronoun on some occasions but that s/he is not constant throughout the text.

The learners' posts were first analysed through corpus analysis software (AntConc 3.2) and then through a careful reading of the utterances where the studied term appeared. In order to analyse the pronoun "I", it is also necessary to take a look at other possible similar mistakes. As a consequence, it was necessary to analyse the lack of capitalization in words which differ from the students' first language and also after full stops. After recounting all the occurrences of the term, they were analysed individually in context and subjected to statistical analysis. After these processes were performed, we were in a position to decide whether this is an interlanguage issue or whether technology plays a role.

## 7. Results

After going through the posts in the sub-corpus, we can observe that most participants use both the incorrect and the correct forms of the pronoun. The 54 participants of the ICT component who make the mistake use 'I' in 157 (25.79%) out of 597 times where the pronoun appears both correctly and incorrectly. In the case of the 9 participants of the ICT component, the numbers are 18 (24.65%) out of 73. Therefore, as the results are rather similar, both components can be treated as a whole from now on.

The percentage of non-capitalization of the pronoun among these 63 students seems to be rather high to be ignored. It is obvious that they only represent a small part of the whole corpus, as stated in table 1, but this small fraction is supposed to have a rather

good command of the language. After applying the variables proposed in the Methodology section, the results are as follows (table 2):

Table 2. Percentages and frequencies.

	YES % / Frequency	NA % / Frequency
Misspelling due to proximity	38.10 / 24	
Missing spaces	22.22 / 14	
Non-capitalization (sentence initial)	39.68 / 25	
Non-capitalization (proper names)	3.17 / 2	22.22 / 14
Non-capitalization (words which differ from L1)	25.40 / 16	46.03 / 29
Misspelling due to lack of awareness	25.40 / 16	
No verb marks	11.11 / 7	
Ungrammatical constructions	55.56 / 35	

At first sight, it seems we are dealing with a case of low level in most cases, as 55.56% of the subjects show ungrammatical constructions. Within this variable, it is necessary to analyse the type of mistakes that the subjects with low grammar performance make (table 3):

Table 3. Errors within the variable ungrammatical constructions.

	YES % / Frequency	NA / Frequency
Non-capitalization (words which differ from L1)	25.4 / 9	42.85 / 15
Misspelling due to lack of awareness	37.14 / 13	
No verb marks	17.14 / 6	
Misspelling due to proximity	31.42 / 11	42.85 / 15
Missing spaces	25.71 / 9	
Non-capitalization (sentence initial)	48.57 / 17	
Non-capitalization (proper names)	0 / 0	14.28 / 5

It is obvious when comparing table 3 to the numbers in table 2 that most of the failures are within the group of students that show ungrammatical constructions. So, taking into account these results within *Ungrammatical constructions*, it is necessary to look at them from the perspective of the total number of errors (table 4):

Table 4. Errors in all variables which appear within ungrammatical constructions in relation to the total numbers.

	%
Non-capitalization (words which differ from L1)	56.25
Misspelling due to lack of awareness	81.25
No verb marks	85.71
Misspelling due to proximity	45.83
Missing spaces	64.28
Non-capitalization (sentence initial)	68
Non-capitalization (proper names)	0

Thus, we can consider that the use of ungrammatical constructions and, therefore, a low level of English, also implies a lack in other areas which show that the student is still learning the language. This type of mistake could be addressed to the influence of interlanguage in some cases (non-capitalization of words which differ from L1), intralanguage (misspelling of words like “evaluating” in analogy with words like “ebullition”) and to lack of knowledge (lack of verb marks).

It is also obvious that the use of ungrammatical constructions is also related to the misuse of basic norms in writing, either in the students’ L1 or in the FL. However, this makes us, as teachers, think that a large number of ungrammatical mistakes are also related to the lack of proofreading. So, even though the problem seems to be that of low level and thus, lack of knowledge, taking a closer look, the fact that almost 40% forget to capitalize words when they are sentence initial is clearly derived from a deficiency or even non-existent revision. It is necessary, therefore, to take a look at the other participants who capitalize the pronoun correctly to check whether this lack of sentence initial capitalization is also present. After analysing the productions of the other participants, we find 18 more cases of lack of sentence initial capitalization which supports the idea of a typing mistake. However, the number in the whole corpus is too low to consider it statistically significant. It seems that those who capitalize properly have a better command of the language.

## 8. Discussion

So, what is to blame? If we ask internet users, in this case, speakers of English as an L1, the answer is clear:

*i wrote journals and poems on my computer long before there was an internet and before that i did the same on typewriters. when i write for myself i don't use caps and i never have. when i am i don't use them wither. as a result i occasionally post without them. That said, I typically write in the formal style when I write online these days. still, the lowercase look pleases me and i can touchtype even faster when i don't have to worry about shift. i think that people need to look within themselves if they spend a calorie of energy complaining about this kind of thing... there are a lot of things that are far bigger problems. (Ask.metafilter.com, 2017).*

The results show that there is a failure that needs to be revised. However, it is difficult to state this failure correctly as an error or as a mistake. Should a mistake be considered as an error when the problem is derived from CMC instead of blaming a poor command of the language? The boundary is not clear but, in any case, teachers must try to help their students to produce accurate texts. As a consequence, this takes us to the dilemma of the usefulness of giving or not corrective feedback (CF), strongly and

interestingly debated by Ferris (1999; 2004) and Truscott (1996; 1999). On the one hand, Truscott assures us that CF seems to be unnecessary or even harmful. In terms of motivation, CF can be a double-edged sword: the student learns the correct form, but feels embarrassed and tries to use the language as less as possible. This is something that often happens with younger students, especially when we refer to speaking. On the other hand, Ferris (1999) maintains that CF is necessary and helpful. In the case of the students who appear in this sub-corpus, CF seems to be necessary. We are not correcting actual grammar, but the need for proofreading before pressing 'enter' in their computers. Therefore, this is not an error, but a mistake due to the influence of CMC. It is good to ask them to revise their productions by explicitly stating so in the classroom. However, this paper is not aimed at creating a new debate on the need for CF, but to call the teachers attention to the fact that each case should be analysed individually considering the student age and motivation. A group of college students learning how to express themselves in English because they want a career in that subject is not the same as a group of secondary school students learning English because they have to do so when what they really want is to go out with their friends either in the real world or on the internet.

Consequently, it seems that capitalization and correctness largely depend on being aware of pressing an extra key. Wood et al (2013; 2014) showed that this is a common error when using textisms and this is applicable to any other form of CMC as in this case. The role of interlanguage cannot be really proved without asking them to write similar texts using pen and paper and, thus, discard the influence of technology. In this respect, the exams of students following this degree can throw some light on the issue. The exams at this university are not online but *in situ*. Students write their answers on paper and these are later sent to the teacher in charge of the subject. After revising these written productions, it could be observed that the lack of capitalization in "I" is also a problem when technology is not part of the process. Therefore, it seems that only addressing ourselves directly to the students can we solve this situation. The next step in this research will be to set up a control group. Their production will be analysed to check whether explicit corrective feedback is effective. Nevertheless, the influence of technology and auto correction in word processors is also part of this problem, as the student may be aware of the rule but also be used to leaving it to the expertise of the corrector.

## 9. Conclusions

Our students know the capitalization rules, but they are immersed in the frantic rhythm of the internet to such a point that they forget proofreading even while knowing they need to write accurately to be positively evaluated. Capitalizing a letter means pressing two keys on a computer keyboard. If we are using a mobile phone, the path can be even more complicated if the dictionary is not activated. Using a computer instead of a pen means a lazier attitude in writing, but this society does not care as long as our interlocutor understands the message. In the same way, television contributed to the disappearance of some minority languages (Krauss, 1992), the internet is the architect of bad writing. The solution is not giving up ICT tools, as they have proved to be an excellent help in the classroom and are part of our everyday lives, but just taking our time when writing. Another possibility to explore is that technology also influences handwriting and students forget to capitalize because they are not used to doing it. Interlanguage is not to be forgotten either. These three possibilities suggest that there should be a more exhaustive reflexion on this topic and different strategies explored which could contribute to correcting it.

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