

A Study of Native Spanish Speakers' Writing in English for Teachers

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Abstract

This essay will be helpful to those with little Spanish background who are teaching Spanish-speaking, particularly Mexican, students or writers who are writing in English as their second language.

In the spring of 2000, I was fortunate enough to obtain a teaching position with a special program at the University of New Mexico. The position involved teaching Literary Analysis in English to a group of students from a prestigious private school in Mexico City, Mexico. The students were already more-or-less fluent in English to the degree that I rarely had any problem communicating with them. I had a limited knowledge of Spanish at the time, and this gave me some advantage when reading their writing. But most of the semester proved a learning experience for me as I became an ESL teacher of sorts. I sought a great deal of advice over these months. Through conversations with the staff of OITEC, the program I worked through, and members of UNM's ESL program, along with a few books on the subject, I came to a much greater understanding of the Spanish language and of the specific mistakes that I noticed my students were making in their English writing.

Understanding why mistakes are made in a class of ESL students not only helps teachers emend the mistakes, but also enables them to better explain to the author how to correct mistakes in future writing. When a teacher shows some understanding of a writer's native language, it makes the writer feel more comfortable with, and less alienated from, him or her. This is especially important to students, such as the ones I taught at UNM, who find themselves far away from home, perhaps for the first time. My purpose in this essay is to provide insight that will be helpful to those with little Spanish background who are teaching Spanish-speaking, particularly Mexican, students or writers who are writing in English as their second language. I will be exploring common errors that I noticed in my students' writing to uncover the reasons these particular mistakes are made. The four levels I have divided these errors into are Word Choice, Syntax, Rhetoric, and Sociolinguistics.

Word Level¹

When writing in a second language, one often misuses words because one does not know the subtle differences between synonyms. For example, I often used email to communicate with my students, and one student always signed “thank you for your comprehension” instead of “thank you for understanding.” This mistake is perfectly understandable since the Spanish word for “understanding” is “comprehesión.” When words are misused as above, there is usually an explanation that has its roots in the native language. Usually meaning is easy to determine, but in cases where it is unclear, one should look up the word in Spanish to find what the exact English meaning is.

There are also several Spanish words that carry different meanings. Writers will sometimes use the English translation of the word when it does not mean exactly what they are trying to say. An example of this tendency, which occurred with several of my students, was the substitution of the word “hard” for either “harsh” or “cruel.” Two students described Mr. McEachern, from *Light in August*, as “hard”: “[Joe Christmas] was treated very hard by Mr. McEachern;” and “Mr. McEachern was a very hard man with Joe.” In both cases, the students meant that McEachern was a cruel man, but the students’ misuse of the word is easily explained. The Spanish word *duro* means “hard,” “harsh,” and “cruel.” Thus, the students had the meaning right, but did not choose the best English translation of *duro*.

My students also often confused the prepositions “of” and “from.” This is because in Spanish the word *de* means both “of” and “from.” “Like” and “as” are also often confused. For example, one of my students wrote, “we wanted to look like if nothing is happening.” This happens because the word *como* is used for both “like” and “as” in Spanish.

ESL writers will sometimes confuse words that sound alike as well. They may write “for his hold life,” when they mean, “for his whole life”; or they will write, “take decisions” instead of “make decisions.” I also had a student write about the stock market “crack,” which began the depression. This is not a major problem since it is usually easy to determine the intended word from the context of the sentence. The reason for such mistakes is that foreign languages tend to be learned aurally. Students will hear words without ever having read them, and sometimes they hear the word incorrectly. Also, as I will discuss later, Spanish is a very phonetic language, so it is reasonable that one would confuse similar words.

Syntactical Level

The majority of Spanish-to-English errors are made at the syntactical level. A lot of it simply has to do with the

different sentence structures in the two languages. Writers will often translate word for word from Spanish if they are unsure of the structure in English. The most common syntactical mistakes, however, have to do with tense. Tense is perhaps the most difficult task to master when learning a second language.

According to Julie Mars, former Director of ESL at UNM, using correct verb tense is one of the major problems students have. This proved to be the case with my students. When writing in English, their tendency is to default back to present verb tense when they are not sure. Present becomes the default tense because it is the first English verb tense learned by ESL students. At times, though, my student's choice of tense seemed to be completely random. The biggest problem that I found in my students was that they would not stay in one tense consistently. Take the following, for example: "This experience *starts* when he *was* a child and *lives* in an orphanage because he *did* not know anything about his family. In the orphanage he *had* a friend *name* Alice that *play* with him..." Tense is a difficult problem to address. The only way to improve on tense is to practice. As a teacher, all one can do is continue to correct tense mistakes until the writer develops an ear for English.

Many mistakes also occur in the structure of the sentence, as sentences are structured differently in Spanish than in English. Marc Schnitzer writes, "Spanish has a less restricted word order than English" (23). Sam Hill agrees, adding that, "This general observation is particularly important when the positioning of the subject and its verb is considered" (45). Julie Mars says that when students are unsure of the correct structure of an English sentence, they will often translate word for word from their own language. For example, one student wrote, "Also in their house lives Blanche." This sounds awkward in English because the subject, Blanche, comes after the verb, and both are preceded by a prepositional phrase. As Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, point out, "The basic underlying word order in an English sentence is Subject—Verb—Direct Object" (9). In Spanish, though, the student's sentence translates word for word to "Tambien en la casa vive Blanche," which is a perfectly legitimate sentence structure in Spanish.

Writers will often write sentence fragments when writing in a second language. According to Julie Mars, fragments are most commonly missing subjects. Missing subjects often occur because, as I will discuss later, run-on sentences are so common in Spanish rhetoric. Students will assume that a subject is evident because they used it earlier in a paragraph. The tendency of the teacher is to divide up run-on sentences, so often sentences are broken into fragments. The same happens when ESL writers attempt to fight their own tendency to write run-ons and thus create fragments. This also partially explains why my students so often left out or confused pronouns in their writing.

Another plausible explanation for missing subjects is that in Spanish subjects are evident from verb tense. M. Stanley Whitley writes, "as opposed to English, Spanish has an optional subject noun phrase in its sentences" (228).

"Spanish can delete pronominal subjects," explains Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, "because it has a rich system of verb inflections which unambiguously indicate the person and number of the subject" (9). In this case, if the writers leave out the subject, it is because they are still thinking in their native language, and not realizing that subjects are not evident from verbs in English.

Oddly enough, I found more often in my students' writings that predicates were missing. Often I would get sentences like "Stanley a young adult whose necessity of skipping school look for a job to sustain the family," or "Joe Christmas and Jesus' life two different stories." This remains inexplicable to me since one would never leave out the predicate in either English or Spanish.

A final syntactical error that students often make is in converting a root word into the correct part of speech. For example, one student mentioned the "betray" of Christ by Judas. In this case, the student did not know how to convert the verb, "betray" to its noun form, "betrayal." For another example, look at the following: "Their relationship was so bore because they did not talk to each other." In this case, the student was unable to convert the verb "bore," to its adjective form, "boring." These errors, like tense errors, represent another case of something that one simply must learn when using English.

Rhetorical Level

Rhetorical strategy in Spanish is fairly similar to that of English. Spanish speaking writers follow the basic thesis-body-conclusion structure, but are somewhat less direct than native English speaking writers. Richard Bender writes, "A basic feature of the English paragraph is that it normally follows a straight line of development." A Spanish paragraph is different as "its line of thought is sometimes interrupted by rather complex digressions." I agree with Bender when he writes, "an awareness that rhetorical patterns differ from one culture to another can help [the student] become more quickly proficient in a writing pattern that is not native to him." I would add that such awareness is also essential for the teacher to understand the student writer.

The most striking difference between Spanish and English rhetoric is that run-on sentences are common and acceptable in Spanish paragraphs. I noticed this trend in all of my student's early essays, before I discouraged them from doing it in English. When I brought it up in class, at the beginning of our semester together, my students told me that that was how one wrote in Spanish. I was not sure that I believed them at first, and was unable to find any book sources supporting their contention. However, my discussions with Julie Mars, and E.A. Mares, a bilingual member of

UNM's English department and an accomplished writer in his own right, verified that this was in fact the case.

Sociolinguistic Level

I have already discussed the tendency of Spanish-speaking students to digress in their writing. According to Julie Mars, Spanish speakers also tend to personalize their writing. I found this quite often in my student's writing. They would frequently use the personal "I." For example, one essay began, "I decided to write about Joe Christmas and women because..." More often, students would end essays with personal opinions, such as "I think Joe Christmas was really confused" or "I think what makes the book more interesting for me is..."

According to E.A. Mares, speakers of Romantic languages tend to speak in metaphors. He gave the example that often native speakers of Spanish would go to English-speaking doctors with stomach problems saying things like, "there is a demon in my stomach," and the doctors would think that they were literally crazy. I did not notice a great deal of this in my students, but one student did write a remarkable description of love with this string of similes, "it is as big as heaven, as strong as metal and as sensible as a diamond." The tone of this may sound inappropriate for a formal English argumentative essay, but how eloquent.

Since my students were from Mexico, I was particularly interested in Mexican Spanish. According to the University of Chicago Spanish-English Dictionary, "Typical adjectives of Mexico are *mero* and *puro*." The first of these is so popular that it means not only "mere" but "very," "real," "just," "same," and many other things (33). Other meanings of *mero* include "pure," "exactly," "only," and "soon." Meanings of *puro* include "pure," "clean," "chaste," "sheer," and "only." Many of these words came up with unusual frequency in my student's writing, especially the adjectives "very," "really," and "only." Take the following passage from this essay on *Light in August*, for example:

He (Joe Christmas) was *really* happy because he was going to have a *real* family but in some days everything changes. Mr. McEachern was *really* bad with him and with Mrs. McEachern...Joe learned *really* bad things from Mr. McEachern.

Or, take this passage by the same student:

Joe Christmas' first experience with religion happened when he was *just* a little kid, when Mrs. and Mr. McEachern adopted his. Mr. McEachern was a *really* hard and straight man, not *just* with Joe but also with

Mrs. McEachern. Mr. McEachern was a *very* religious person...

These are two extreme examples, but these words were popular with all of my students. The problem with such adjectives like "really," and "just," is that they do not mean anything. They are used as filler and make for weak writing. I showed my students this by reading the above paragraphs to them with, and then without, the superfluous adjectives.

One thing that may occasionally arise is that students are not taught offensive English terms; this can cause problems. I had one student use the word "nigger" very casually in a *Light in August* essay. Of course, this is the term the Faulkner used when writing in the context of the South in the 1930s. My student had no idea of the connotations of the term or how inappropriate his use of it was. My suggestion was either to use a different term, or to put the term in quotes to show that the usage was not his own but rather the racial identifier of the South that Joe Christmas suffered under. This was an innocent mistake, but one can see in it the danger of seriously offending the audience.

At one point in the semester I sent my students to see UNM theatre's production of Eric Bogosian's *Suburbia*, of which one student commented, "It gave us a new understanding of the language." Even the director of the OITEC program, Gladis Fois de Marisma, expressed that it was important for the students to learn American slang and even American obscenities. One may not feel comfortable working this into the classroom curriculum, but it is important to understand that if the students only have an academic knowledge of English, then they were probably not taught such words, and do not understand their inappropriateness.

Here are a few other important differences between Spanish and English that do not cohesively fit into the rest of this essay, but will prove helpful to teachers:

- Spanish is a very phonetically spelled language; therefore spelling mistakes are common in English. Students will spell out English words phonetically; for example, one student wrote out the words "full fill" for "fulfill." I have also described earlier how students will often write an incorrect word that sounds like the word they mean. This is also partially due to the phonetic spelling of Spanish.
- Spanish does not have the possessive "'s." Spanish speakers show possession by saying, for example, "la casa de Joe (the house of Joe)," rather than, "Joe's house." Writers will often simply leave out the possessive "'s." One student, for example, wrote, "all her mother time was for Laurie."

- Native Spanish speakers have trouble pronouncing English words beginning with “s,” because there are no Spanish words that begin with the “s” sound. Spanish words will instead have an “e” in front of the “s.” For example, the word for “state” in Spanish is *estado*. This can cause a problem when students are choosing between using “a” or “an” in front of a noun beginning with “s.” One student wrote, “she was *an* strong and smart woman,” because they inserted an “e” sound in front of the word “strong.”
- And, as a final note, Spanish has far fewer capitalization rules than English. “In Spanish, only proper nouns are capitalized. Nationalities, languages, days of the week and months of the year are not considered proper nouns” (Jarvis 326).

Conclusion

This essay does not pretend to be a complete comparative analysis of Spanish and English. However, my research and experiences, which spurred this essay, will provide understanding to anyone with no previous Spanish background who is teaching native Spanish speakers writing in English.

During the course of my semester of teaching students from Mexico, I often used the above material to help my students with their writing. The students appreciated that their teacher took the time to understand the roots of their mistakes in English usage by exploring their native language. This not only enabled me to better explain the students' mistakes to them, but it also helped me to establish a better relationship with them. My purpose in writing this is to give teachers attempting to teach a class in English to native Spanish speakers a better understanding of the differences between Spanish and English so that they can recognize and comment on common mistakes in order to better teach and to better interact with their students.

¹ All definitions from this section and throughout the text are from *Cassell's Spanish & English Dictionary* and *The University of Chicago Spanish-English English-Spanish Dictionary*.

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