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Grammatical Transfer Errors in EFL Writing: Impact of Spanish Influence, Proficiency Levels, and Task Types

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Abstract. This study examines grammatical transfer errors in the English writing of Ecuadorian high school English as a foreign language (EFL) learners, focusing on the influence of Spanish as a first language (L1), English proficiency levels, and writing task types. Despite extensive research on L1 transfer, gaps remain regarding how proficiency and task complexity shape errors in Latin American adolescent learners. Using a mixed-method approach that combined contrastive analysis (CA) and statistical procedures, the study analyzed the prevalence of grammatical transfer errors relative to lexical errors in the writing of 180 purposively selected Ecuadorian high school students. Common grammatical errors influenced by Spanish were identified, with a specific focus on interlingual transfer. These errors were analyzed among learners at A1, A2, and B1 levels to explore proficiency effects. The study also compared grammatical error patterns between narrative and argumentative writing tasks to evaluate the role of task type. Findings indicate that grammatical errors—particularly in articles, prepositions, and pronouns—are more frequent than lexical errors and tend to decrease as proficiency increases. Furthermore, argumentative writing tasks resulted in more errors than narrative tasks, suggesting that task complexity affects error frequency. These results provide insights into common grammatical transfer patterns among Ecuadorian EFL learners, emphasizing the roles of proficiency and task type.

Keywords: contrastive analysis; grammatical transfer errors; Spanish influence; writing skills; writing task types

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1. Introduction

In the field of second language acquisition (SLA), writing has become an increasingly important area of study. Research has highlighted writing-based learning strategies, emphasizing the essential role of writing in second language learning from both task-based and collaborative perspectives (Alshammari, 2020; McDonough & Crawford, 2020). Another avenue of teaching approaches is the use of technology to improve second language (L2) writing skills (Al Mahmud, 2023; Jiang et al., 2021). Research has also shown that mastery of L2 grammatical structures is essential in L2 writing skills, which underscores the importance of grammar in writing (Jamoom, 2021; Qin & Zhang, 2023).

Additionally, the influence of the first language (L1) plays a crucial role in developing writing skills in a foreign language and cannot be overlooked (Marita, 2021). L1 transfer can occur at various levels – pronunciation, grammar, lexicon, and spelling – exerting both positive and negative effects. In EFL contexts, where learners often have limited exposure to authentic input, the impact of L1 becomes even more pronounced. Among Spanish-speaking learners, L1 transfer frequently leads to persistent grammatical errors that hinder accurate language production and may negatively affect academic performance and communicative effectiveness. Consequently, many SLA researchers have sought to determine the extent to which such errors stem from negative transfer (Agulló, 2020; Derrick et al., 2018), as understanding these patterns can help educators design targeted instructional strategies to minimize interference and enhance students' writing accuracy.

While existing research on transfer errors in EFL writing in Spanish-speaking and Latin American contexts has primarily focused on analyzing the types and causes of errors (Cabrera et al., 2014; Rubio, 2023), few studies have explored the role that learners' proficiency levels and writing genres play in shaping those errors. The present study examines the writing skills of Ecuadorian high school students, focusing on the most common grammatical errors caused by negative language transfer in EFL writing.

Research in SLA has shown that higher L2 proficiency levels correlate with fewer language transfer errors in EFL writing (Zheng & Park, 2013). Nonetheless, most of this research has been conducted in populations whose first language is not Spanish, but rather English, Chinese, or Korean. To address this gap, this study compares EFL writing samples from Ecuadorian students in the first three years of high school, evaluating their language performance across Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels A1, A2, and B1 (Council of Europe, 2020). The goal is to examine whether grammatical transfer errors from Spanish vary by proficiency level.

Additionally, prior research has shown that the type of written task can influence transfer patterns in EFL learners (Wang & Wen, 2002; Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013); however, studies focusing on grammatical transfer errors in Latin America are scarce. This study addresses this gap by evaluating how task type affects grammatical accuracy in Ecuadorian EFL learners' writing. Most previous

studies (Watcharapunyawong & Usaha, 2013) involved adult learners, while the current study focuses on adolescents.

Therefore, the following research gaps emerge. First, the progression of Spanish-English transfer errors across CEFR levels (A1-B1) in adolescent learners has yet to be thoroughly examined. Similarly, comparative studies on grammatical transfer in narrative versus argumentative tasks within Latin American EFL settings remain scarce. Furthermore, adolescent public school learners—despite their distinct L2 learning challenges—continue to be overlooked in existing research. Building on the gaps identified in previous research, this study aims to explore the following questions related to the nature and impact of grammatical transfer errors within Ecuadorian high school EFL learners' writing:

RQ1: What are the most common grammatical transfer errors influenced by Spanish in the written production of Ecuadorian senior high school EFL learners and how prevalent are these errors in comparison to lexical transfer errors?

RQ2: How does English proficiency level (A1, A2, and B1) influence the frequency and types of grammatical transfer errors in the written production of Ecuadorian EFL learners?

RQ3: How does the type of writing task (narrative vs. argumentative) affect the frequency and types of grammatical transfer errors in the written production of Ecuadorian EFL learners?

2. Literature Review

Importance of Writing Skills in ESL/EFL Environments

Writing is a pivotal technology in human history, serving as a powerful tool and cultural artifact rooted in the human mind (Winardi, 2020). Writing allows us to document information, opinions, beliefs, and emotions, facilitating communication across generations (Gallagher, 2023). Despite its importance, writing is a challenging skill that requires appropriate teaching, as it involves the development of ideas, mental representations, and experiences (Graham, 2019). In the context of English as a second language (ESL)/EFL education, writing is a fundamental yet complex skill essential for language proficiency (VeJayan & Yunus, 2022). It equips learners to meet real-life communicative demands and represents a significant focus in SLA research. Studies have highlighted various approaches to teaching writing, such as task-based and collaborative writing, which engage learners in practicing and refining their language skills (Alshammari, 2020; McDonough & Crawford, 2020; Storch, 2016). Therefore, teaching writing skills is a critical component of the ESL/EFL instructional process, emphasizing its importance in achieving language proficiency.

Teaching Writing Skills in ESL/EFL Contexts

As a fundamental aspect of English language teaching, writing encompasses tasks ranging from straightforward activities such as filling out forms to more elaborate assignments which include composing reports, stories, or application letters (Glass & Marzano, 2018). The goal of most ESL/EFL courses is to produce well-structured written work that meets academic standards, requiring a writing program tailored to learners' needs and expectations (Leo, 2021). Teachers must

select appropriate instructional approaches—whether they emphasize process, product, genre, or creative writing—which can be applied individually or cooperatively (Tompkins, 2018).

Teaching writing also involves developing genre-specific skills, beginning with text analysis of the target genre, alongside creative writing tasks that encourage self-expression (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014; Glass & Marzano, 2018; Tompkins, 2018). Providing effective feedback and addressing common linguistic errors are also crucial for improving students' writing proficiency (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014). Moreover, grammatical accuracy and proper structural use are essential, as neglecting form-focused instruction may lead to fossilized errors—particularly those stemming from L1 interference (Jamoom, 2021; Qin & Zhang, 2023). Another innovative approach is the use of technology, which has created numerous opportunities to enhance the teaching of writing skills in ESL/EFL environments (Al Mahmud, 2023; Jiang et al., 2021).

Language Transfer and Contrastive Analysis

Language transfer, commonly referred to as language interference or cross-linguistic influence (CLI), represents a fundamental concept in SLA research (Robinson, 2013). Odlin's (1989) definition highlights that transfer encompasses both facilitative and inhibitory effects of L1 on L2 learning: linguistic similarities between L1 and L2 promote learning, whereas structural differences often cause interference, resulting in negative transfer effects, particularly evident in L2 writing errors (Marita, 2021).

Within error analysis, the study of transfer errors typically relies on contrastive analysis (CA), which is recognized as a valuable tool for identifying and understanding language influenced by transfer phenomena. By systematically comparing the linguistic systems of the L1 and L2, CA helps researchers and educators predict areas of difficulty for learners and design targeted instructional strategies to address these challenges (Fatemi & Ziaei, 2012; Zawahreh, 2013). Therefore, the current study employs CA as its analytical framework.

Recent SLA research highlights that negative transfer decreases as proficiency levels rise, though it remains a major error source in early L2 development (Derrick et al., 2018; Agulló, 2020). Krashen (2002) found that L1 interference is more frequent in foreign language (EFL) contexts compared to ESL settings, suggesting environment plays a role in transfer-related errors. Agulló (2020) notes that high levels of proficiency mitigate L1 influence on L2, reducing negative transfer and aiding more accurate language production. Ultimately, language transfer continues to be a vital construct for understanding the cognitive processes underpinning L2 acquisition, and it has a notable influence on the learners' written production in the target language (Marita, 2021).

Error Taxonomies

According to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), error categories should emerge from actual data, which means classifications may evolve as analysis proceeds. This data-driven approach facilitates the identification of various error patterns and provides a structured framework for understanding learner difficulties. The use

of error taxonomies remains a topic of considerable debate, particularly because errors often result from complex interactions rather than a single source. Dulay et al. (1982) emphasize that classifying errors is not straightforward; it involves understanding various factors influencing language learning. Different authors have proposed various error taxonomies, including Keshavarz (2012), who proposed a process-based classification—errors arising from omission, overuse, substitution, or permutation—similar to Dulay et al.'s surface strategy taxonomy of omission, overuse, misformation, and misordering. Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005) note that error classifications may yield additional subcategories, reinforcing that classification systems should adapt as data is analyzed to better capture the range of learner errors.

Negative transfer errors, particularly in Spanish-speaking English learners, are a well-studied phenomenon in which learners borrow linguistic patterns from their native language. Research by Cabrera et al. (2014) and Rubio (2023) shows that these errors align closely with Keshavarz's linguistic-based categories and have led to further subcategories, such as errors involving gender, number, and question formation. Identifying both error types and sources is crucial, as it offers insights into their origins and informs more accurate error analysis.

Sources of Errors

As Khan (2022) notes, errors in language learning are an inevitable part of the process, representing learners' attempts to apply new language rules. Although several factors influence these errors, language transfer is a prominent one. While transfer from a learner's L1 is not the sole structural cause of errors, it plays a critical role, especially when learners rely on their native language to express themselves in a second or foreign language (Prayuda et al., 2023).

As explained by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), two main types of errors are identified in second language learning: intralingual and interlingual. The former are caused by the complexities of the target language and do not result from first language transfer. Interlingual errors, also known as transfer errors, are particularly common at the structural level and often result from gaps in L2 grammatical knowledge (Cook, 2001). Interlingual errors, or transfer errors, arise when learners apply structures from their L1 to their L2. This is common when learners lack sufficient knowledge in the L2 or struggle to activate the correct language routines (McLaughlin, 1988). For instance, a Spanish speaker might write the *house yellow* in English, mimicking the Spanish structure *la casa amarilla*. Limited exposure to the L2, especially in classroom-only settings, makes interlingual transfer more prevalent, affecting syntax, lexis, morphology, mechanics, and discourse (Mahmoud, 2010). In these contexts, Krashen (2002) points out that insufficient natural language exposure and frequent translation exercises further reinforce transfer errors.

The present study focuses on transfer errors and thus adopts the classifications of James (1998) and Brown (2007), which emphasize the interlingual and intralingual distinctions. These classifications are more straightforward to observe in written

work, as opposed to errors influenced by teaching methods, context, or communication strategies.

Previous Studies

Research on language transfer in writing skills has extensively examined how L1 influences L2 during the learning process, leading to various types of errors. According to Leo (2021), these errors include issues such as syntax (word order), grammatical agreement, collocation, and word choice. In addition, L1 transfer can affect writing skills in aspects such as punctuation, style, organization, grammar, spelling, and even code-switching. This phenomenon has been further explored in studies by Mourssi (2013), Bi (2023), and Rubio (2023) in both ESL and EFL contexts.

Specific types of grammatical transfer errors include the incorrect use of definite articles, as Spanish-speaking learners often add definite articles in English owing to the influence of their native language (Cabrera et al., 2014). Pronoun errors are another significant issue, with common problems including subject pronoun omission and the misuse of object and reflexive pronouns (Torrijos, 2022). Additionally, Spanish learners frequently make errors in the use of prepositions, often misusing, adding, or omitting them in English sentences (Alisoy, 2024).

Studies have also shown a link between L2 proficiency and the quality of written output. For instance, research by Zheng and Park (2013) and Carrió-Pastor (2024) indicates that stronger L2 skills often correspond to better writing in general in L2. Zheng and Park (2013) emphasized that proper practice, feedback, and exposure to L2 writing can help minimize such errors, while strong syntactic and lexical skills in L2 are vital for improving written production. Carrió-Pastor (2024) reported that the use of grammatical gender in the English language is affected by the learners' mother tongue in lower levels of L2 proficiency; nonetheless, this feature improves when acquiring foreign language proficiency. However, these studies do not specifically address the role of L2 proficiency in grammatical transfer errors in a Latin-American context.

Task type also plays a role in language transfer during writing. Wang and Wen (2002) reported more use of learners' first language during narrative tasks than in argumentative ones, especially during idea generation and organization. Similarly, Watcharapunyawong and Usaha (2013) found that genre impacts writing errors in Thai EFL learners, as different genres demand distinct structural elements. According to Kim and Yoon (2014), Korean learners with lower proficiency levels relied more on their L1, particularly when completing argumentative writing tasks. Nonetheless, these studies primarily focused on broader transfer phenomena rather than grammatical transfer errors.

Overall, prior research has examined language transfer, the impact of L2 proficiency on writing transfer, and how task types influence these processes. However, most studies focus on aspects such as organization, style, and general writing skills, rather than grammatical transfer errors. Additionally, many involved small sample sizes or participants from diverse L1 backgrounds. Unlike

most earlier studies, which involved college-level learners (Wang & Wen, 2002; Zheng & Park, 2013), this research focuses on adolescent high school EFL learners. While similar studies (Cabrera et al., 2014) have examined grammatical and lexical transfer errors in Latin-American contexts, they did not analyze the influence of proficiency levels or task types, which this study aims to explore.

3. Method

This study follows an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design. First, quantitative data on the frequency of grammatical transfer errors were collected through the analysis of writing samples. Subsequently, qualitative analysis was applied to classify the types of errors and determine their linguistic origins, using contrastive analysis (CA) between English and Spanish grammar structures. This design was chosen to allow for both a broad overview of error patterns and an in-depth interpretation of the sources of those errors. The combination of methods enables triangulation, increasing the validity of the findings.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed, ensuring the protection of participants' rights and confidentiality. For this purpose, ethical approval was obtained from the appropriate educational authorities. Informed consent was also secured from all participants and their parents.

Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at a public high school in Ecuador with a purposefully selected sample of 180 Spanish-speaking students in the final three years of secondary education. The participants' ages ranged from 15 to 18 years old. The majority of students had limited exposure to English outside the classroom, as their primary contact with the language occurred during school hours. The study sample was selected using the Oxford Quick Placement Test (UCLES, 2001), and participants were divided into three proficiency groups based on the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2020): A1 (beginner), A2 (elementary), and B1 (lower-intermediate), with 60 students in each group. The most commonly practiced EFL writing genres in their lessons were narrative and argumentative writing.

Data Collection Instruments and Process

The Oxford Quick Placement Test (Version 2, 2001) was employed to determine the students' English proficiency levels in alignment with the CEFR. The test was selected owing to its efficiency, as it could be completed within a single 40-minute class period, as well as its widespread availability. Furthermore, this test has been validated for its accuracy in assessing language proficiency levels, while its reliability has been established through extensive use in educational settings (UCLES, 2001).

In addition, the participants completed two writing tasks, which served as the basis for the error analysis. For both tasks, students were instructed to write a coherent paragraph of 80–140 words within 30 minutes. Clear prompts were provided, such as “Describe your typical weekend activities,” for the narrative task and “State your opinion on video games and support it with reasons,” for the argumentative task. The same instructions were given to all participants to ensure

consistency, and the tasks were piloted beforehand to verify clarity and timing. A total of 180 students were selected and divided into A1, A2, and B1 groups based on their test scores. The study's data collection occurred in two stages over an eight-week period. In the first stage, the Oxford Quick Placement Test was administered to the students to establish their English proficiency. In the second stage, participants were asked to write a narrative task first, followed by an argumentative task one week later.

Data Analysis

The written texts were analyzed using CA to identify grammatical transfer errors influenced by the participants' first language, namely Spanish. The errors were classified using a linguistic taxonomy (e.g., errors in verb tense, articles, prepositions) and a surface structure taxonomy, which categorized errors into omission, overuse, misformation, and misordering. The analysis focused on interlingual (L1 transfer) errors.

Grammatical transfer errors were quantified through an error count technique, which tracked the frequency of errors within each proficiency group and writing task type. These figures were compared across the three levels of proficiency (A1, A2, B1) and the two task genres. Variations in the statistical significance of transfer errors among the three groups (A1, A2, and B1) were examined using the Kruskal-Wallis test, a non-parametric statistical test suitable for comparing three or more groups when the data do not meet the assumptions of normality (Brezina, 2018). Post-hoc pairwise comparisons were conducted using the Mann-Whitney U test with a Bonferroni correction to identify specific differences between groups. Additionally, grammatical transfer errors were compared between the two writing task types using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test. This test was chosen because it is appropriate for evaluating related samples (Brezina, 2018), in this case, the narrative and argumentative texts written by the same participants. The use of this test also accounts for the non-normal distribution of the data.

The quantitative analysis focused on counting and statistically analyzing grammatical transfer errors, while the qualitative analysis provided a deeper understanding of the nature and sources of these errors, drawing on prior research and linguistic comparisons between Spanish and English. The researcher, along with an independent reviewer, verified the error classification and count to ensure interrater reliability, achieving a reliability rate of 99%.

4. Results

Prevalence of Grammatical Transfer Errors

This initial research question explored the impact of Spanish on grammatical transfer errors in the writing of Ecuadorian senior high school EFL students. In the case of this study, the focus was on interlingual errors. Out of 27,306 words analyzed, grammatical transfer errors represented 96.5% of all identified transfer errors, indicating their predominance over lexical ones. The most common grammatical transfer errors (see Table 1) occurred in articles (24.77%), prepositions (24.38%), and pronouns (24.09%). In contrast, lexical transfer errors, such as invented words and false cognates, comprised only 3.53% of all transfer

errors. The errors were categorized based on their grammatical function and contrasted with their Spanish equivalents to confirm that they stemmed from L1 transfer.

Table 1: Grammatical and lexical transfer errors in Ecuadorian EFL learners

Grammatical transfer errors	f	%
Articles	512	24.77
Prepositions	504	24.38
Pronouns	498	24.09
Verbs	110	5.32
Wrong word order	98	4.74
Adverbs	73	3.53
Nouns	59	2.85
Adjectives	44	2.13
Negation	37	1.79
Determiners	34	1.64
Complementizers	25	1.21
Lexical transfer errors		
Invented words	59	2.85
False cognates	14	0.68
Total	2067	100
Total word count: 27306		

The most frequent grammatical errors involved the overuse or omission of articles, especially the definite article. Learners often used definite articles in English where they are unnecessary, likely owing to the frequent use of articles in Spanish. For example, learners wrote *Then I play the basketball* or *The Saturday I went to the field*, errors that reflect the Spanish use of articles. In contrast, the omission of articles, such as *We returned to house*, was also common owing to Spanish not always requiring articles where English does.

Errors related to prepositions were also frequent. These included misuse, overuse, and omission of prepositions, with misuse errors occurring most frequently. Examples include *I go to shopping* (unnecessary preposition *to* based on Spanish influence) and *That depends of yourself* (using *of* instead of *on*). These errors often reflected the learners' reliance on Spanish equivalents of prepositions, which are used differently in English.

Omission of subject pronouns was another common error, as Spanish allows null subjects, whereas English typically requires explicit subject pronouns. For instance, learners wrote sentences such as *In the evening played soccer*, omitting the necessary subject pronoun *I* due to L1 transfer from Spanish. Verbal errors involved the misuse of verbs, often linked to incorrect tense or form selection. A typical error was using the verb *have* to describe age, as in *I had eight years old*, reflecting the Spanish use of *tener* for expressing age. Incorrect word order errors

stemmed from the different syntactic structures between Spanish and English. Learners produced sentences such as *I usually on the weekends play soccer*, mimicking Spanish word order.

Error Variation by Proficiency Level

The second research question explores the impact of English proficiency level on the type and frequency of grammatical transfer errors among Ecuadorian EFL learners at A1, A2, and B1 levels. The data analysis shows a clear trend: as proficiency increases, the frequency of transfer errors decreases. The most frequent errors across all groups include the overuse of articles, omission of pronouns, and misuse of prepositions. However, significant differences in the frequency of these errors were observed between proficiency levels.

A Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to compare the distribution of errors among the three proficiency levels. The results reveal statistically significant differences (p-values) in five types of errors: overuse and omission of articles, omission and misuse of pronouns, and misuse of verbs. Results from post-hoc comparisons using the Mann-Whitney U test with a Bonferroni adjustment revealed that B1 learners made significantly fewer errors compared to A1 learners and, in some cases, fewer than A2 learners. However, there was no significant difference between A1 and A2 for most errors, indicating that the largest reduction in errors occurs between the lower (A1 and A2) and higher (B1) proficiency levels.

The findings reveal that higher proficiency levels (B1) tend to produce fewer grammatical transfer errors compared to lower levels (A1 and A2), particularly in the five key error categories where statistically significant differences were identified (Table 2):

Table 2: Frequency and statistical analysis of grammatical transfer errors across proficiency levels (A1, A2, B1)

Error type	A1		A2		B1		p
	f	%	f	%	F	%	
Article overuse	197	25.79	174	22.92	122	25.9	0.006
Omission of articles	12	1.57	6	0.79	1	0.21	0.009
Preposition overuse	20	2.62	13	1.71	9	1.91	0.226
Misuse of prepositions	118	15.45	115	15.15	79	16.77	0.042
Omission of prepositions	45	5.89	48	6.32	57	12.1	0.595
Omission of pronouns	183	23.95	205	27.01	93	19.75	<.0001
Misuse of pronouns	10	1.31	7	0.92	0	0	0.069
Misuse of verbs	43	5.62	50	6.59	17	3.61	0.001
Wrong word order	34	4.45	39	5.14	25	5.31	0.264
Misuse of adverbs	22	2.88	30	3.95	21	4.46	0.513
Misuse of nouns	26	3.4	15	1.98	18	3.82	0.309
Misuse of adjectives	12	1.57	21	2.77	11	2.34	0.184
Misuse of negation	18	2.36	13	1.71	6	1.27	0.082
Misuse of determiners	13	1.7	14	1.84	7	1.49	0.359
Misuse of complementizers	11	1.44	9	1.19	5	1.06	0.513
TOTAL	764	100	759	100	471	100	
Word count	7192		9570		10544		

Error Variation by Task Type

The third research question examined whether narrative and argumentative writing tasks influence the quantity and types of grammatical transfer errors in Ecuadorian EFL students at A1, A2, and B1 levels. Narrative tasks resulted in 1021 total errors, while argumentative tasks had 973. The most frequent narrative task errors were omitted pronouns (24.78%), misused prepositions (23.89%), and excess article use (18.12%). In argumentative texts, article overuse (31.65%) and pronoun omission (23.43%) were most common.

A Wilcoxon signed-rank test revealed significant differences in ten error types across the two genres. Article overuse, pronoun and preposition misuse, and problems with adjectives, complementizers, negation, and determiners were more frequent in argumentative writing, whereas preposition overuse, preposition omission, and adverb misuse were more common in narratives (Table 3).

Table 3: Frequency and statistical analysis of grammatical transfer errors in narrative vs. argumentative paragraphs

Error type	Narrative		Argumentative		p
	f	%	f	%	
Article overuse	185	18.12	308	31.65	0.001
Omission of articles	12	1.18	7	0.72	0.279
Preposition overuse	36	3.53	6	0.62	< 0.0001
Misuse of prepositions	244	23.89	68	6.99	< 0.0001
Omission of prepositions	102	9.99	48	4.93	0.003
Omission of pronouns	253	24.78	228	23.43	0.452
Misuse of pronouns	0	0	17	1.75	0.002
Misuse of verbs	39	3.82	71	7.29	0.052
Wrong word order	46	4.51	52	5.34	0.585
Misuse of adverbs	56	5.48	17	1.75	< 0.0001
Misuse of nouns	32	3.13	27	2.77	0.546
Misuse of adjectives	5	0.49	39	4.01	< 0.0001
Misuse of negation	5	0.49	32	3.29	< 0.0001
Misuse of determiners	6	0.59	28	2.88	0.003
Misuse of complementizers	0	0	25	2.57	< 0.0001
TOTAL	1021	100	973	100	
Word count	15236		12070		

5. Discussion

The findings underscore the strong effect of negative transfer in students' written English, particularly errors involving article overuse, pronoun omission, and preposition misuse. The study found that these grammatical errors were consistent across different proficiency levels (A1, A2, B1), indicating similar behavior among learners with the same L1 (Spanish). This supports the concept of intra-L1-group-homogeneity, where learners with the same native language exhibit similar error patterns when using English as their L2 (Bi, 2023). However, while the frequency of errors decreased with higher proficiency levels, some errors such as overuse of articles and omission of pronouns persisted even among B1 learners. These areas are especially prone to transfer owing to structural

mismatches. For instance, Spanish permits subject omission (null subjects), which leads to frequent pronoun omissions in English (e.g., *went to school* instead of *I went to school*). Similarly, Spanish article use tends to be more frequent and obligatory, which may cause learners to insert unnecessary articles in English. Prepositions present further difficulty due to differences in collocation and meaning, with learners often mapping Spanish structures directly onto English (e.g., *depends of* instead of *depends on*).

Higher proficiency levels were linked to a general reduction in grammatical transfer errors, especially between A1 and B1 learners. However, this improvement was not consistent across all error types. Persistent issues – such as article overuse and pronoun omission – remained even at the B1 level. Although B1 learners showed better command of basic grammar, they continued to struggle with more advanced structures, particularly with articles in complex noun phrases. This indicates that as learners' proficiency grows, the nature of their errors shifts from basic to more nuanced. This finding is consistent with previous research on language transfer that examines grammatical errors and contrasts their frequency across different L2 proficiency levels (e.g., Zheng & Park, 2013). Unlike these studies, which often contrast English with languages other than Spanish, the current study highlights the unique challenges faced by Spanish-speaking EFL learners. This suggests the need to incorporate comparisons of certain difficult Spanish and English grammatical structures in some EFL lessons, especially in terms of grammar and writing instruction.

When comparing narrative and argumentative tasks, the study found that argumentative paragraphs contained a higher proportion of grammatical transfer errors. This was attributed to the higher difficulty level of argumentative writing, which imposes greater cognitive and linguistic demands, as it requires learners to express opinions, justify claims, and use complex grammatical structures such as conditionals or passive voice. These demands may overwhelm learners' processing capacity, leading to more frequent grammatical transfer errors compared to narrative tasks, which are more familiar and structurally simple. The most frequent errors in argumentative paragraphs included overuse of articles, misuse of prepositions, and omission of pronouns. Interestingly, some errors, such as the omission of articles and misuse of adverbs, were more common in narrative paragraphs. This finding is consistent with other studies that have reported differences in language transfer depending on the genre used in the writing task (Wang & Wen, 2002); however, they have not specifically explored the contrast between narrative and argumentative writing. Therefore, the present study provides new insights into how task complexity influences error patterns, suggesting that increased task complexity correlates with a rise in specific grammatical errors. For instance, argumentative writing, which often involves abstract nouns and academic phrasing, led to a higher incidence of article overuse and preposition misuse – structures that are cognitively and syntactically more demanding.

The implications of these findings are particularly relevant for enhancing EFL teaching practices and supporting student learning. Teachers should move

beyond merely identifying errors and instead address the underlying causes of grammatical transfer, focusing on targeted instruction for common transfer-related issues. This includes the use of explicit error correction techniques, constructive feedback, and scaffolded writing activities. An effective strategy is the incorporation of contrastive grammar instruction, which highlights structural differences between Spanish and English—especially in the use of articles, pronouns, and prepositions. Additionally, the integration of AI-assisted writing tools can provide learners with real-time, individualized feedback to help them recognize and correct recurrent errors. To support writing development, especially in more demanding genres, educators should scaffold argumentative writing tasks using genre-specific sentence frames and model texts. Given the limited English exposure typical in many EFL contexts, prioritizing explicit, contrastive, and technology-enhanced grammar instruction is essential for improving writing proficiency among Spanish-speaking learners.

Although this study provides valuable insights into grammatical transfer errors among Ecuadorian EFL learners, limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is cross-sectional, capturing errors at a single point in time. Future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to track how these errors evolve as learners progress in proficiency. Second, the study focused on written production, but future research could explore whether similar transfer errors occur in spoken language, offering a more holistic view of L1 interference in EFL learning. In addition, future studies could explore how contrastive grammar instruction, AI-driven tools, and scaffolded genre-based writing contribute to improving EFL learners' writing skills

6. Conclusions

The study found that grammatical transfer errors occurred far more frequently than lexical transfer errors in the writing of Ecuadorian EFL learners. The most prevalent Spanish-influenced grammatical errors were article overuse, pronoun omission, and preposition misuse. These errors accounted for the majority of transfer errors, while lexical errors, such as invented words and false cognates, were minimal. This indicates that grammatical interference from Spanish is a more significant challenge for Ecuadorian EFL learners.

Proficiency level had a significant impact on the frequency of grammatical transfer errors. Higher proficiency levels were associated with fewer errors compared to lower levels, particularly in areas such as article overuse, pronoun omission, and verb misuse. However, some errors, such as overuse of articles and omission of pronouns, persisted even at the B1 level. This suggests that while higher proficiency reduces the overall number of errors, certain transfer errors are more resistant to improvement and may require targeted instructional interventions to address.

The type of writing task significantly influenced the frequency and type of grammatical transfer errors. Argumentative paragraphs had more errors compared to narrative paragraphs, likely owing to the higher cognitive and linguistic demands of argumentative writing. Common errors in argumentative

tasks included overuse of articles, misuse of prepositions, and omission of pronouns. In contrast, narrative tasks saw more errors related to adverb misuse and article omission. This indicates that task complexity plays a crucial role in error production, with more complex tasks such as argumentative writing leading to a higher frequency of transfer errors.

To reduce grammatical transfer errors in EFL learners with limited English exposure, this study recommends integrating contrastive grammar instruction, AI-assisted feedback tools, and scaffolded writing tasks. Future research should test their effectiveness in real classroom settings to improve writing skills. This study contributes to ongoing discussions on effective EFL instruction by examining grammatical transfer errors in the under-researched context of Ecuadorian public secondary education, where students often struggle to meet national proficiency standards (Angelis, 2022). The findings underscore the need for form-focused instruction that addresses common L1-influenced errors, as well as culturally and linguistically responsive teaching practices. By identifying error patterns linked to both proficiency levels and task types, the study offers a foundation for targeted grammar instruction and improved teacher training tailored to the specific needs of Spanish-speaking EFL learners.

7. References

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