



## Orthographic Errors of Slovak University EFL Students

*Ema Fricekova*

*University of Prešov, Faculty of Arts, 17. novembra 1, 080 01 Prešov, Slovakia*

### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the frequency and types of intralingual and interlingual transfer errors in the orthographic written production of Slovak university students learning English as a foreign language. Using a mixed-methods design, the research analysed written papers from a sample of 77 first-year full-time undergraduate students at the University of Prešov, Slovakia. Findings reveal that orthographic errors in spelling (243 instances) are the most frequent cases of intralingual errors. They primarily stemmed from learners' challenges with English orthographic complexities, including letter omissions, incorrect word separation, and phonetic misinterpretations. Other intralingual orthographic errors included proper nouns capitalisation (20 instances) and capitalisation of the personal pronoun 'I' (5 instances), and apostrophe usage (2 instances). Regarding interlingual transfer errors, the most common was the transfer of Slovak quotation mark rules (10 instances), indicating direct L1 interference in punctuation. Errors in ordinal number forms (5 instances) and Slovak spelling of English proper nouns (2 instances) also demonstrated direct L1 influence. The result of this research suggests that orthographic errors are present in students' written performances, and we especially need to pay more attention to the area of spelling, which proved to be the most problematic area.

Keywords: mother tongue, negative transfer, errors, interference, orthography

### Introduction

In a process of learning a new language, it is natural that students make mistakes; however, if it becomes a regular part of their performance, it is considered as an error which should have the attention of a learner and the teacher as well. The present study will focus on this situation in the context of Slovak university students during their English language classes and the errors they make in the area of orthography. In this way, the teachers in Slovakia will be able to detect areas which need special attention during the education process of Slovak university students.

If students make an error, there is a need to find its source. For a better overview of the topic of language errors, the next section will introduce the most important terms related to this issue. Brown (2014) distinguishes four main sources of errors: the interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, context of learning, and communication strategies.

- **The interlingual transfer** is the source of learners' errors, especially in the early stages of language production, since the mother tongue serves as the first model for learning another language. For example, a learner commits a pronunciation error resulting from the similar appearance of words. When this happens, it is identified as a negative interlingual transfer.

Thornbury (1999) emphasises that transfer as an influential element does not have to necessarily have a negative impact on learning the language; it may have a positive effect (transfer) as well. For instance, when both languages – the mother tongue and the target language are from the same language family, it may even support the learning process.

- **The intralingual transfer** is understood as the source of errors arising from the target language itself. Here, Brown (2000) refers to Jaszolt (1995), who claims that after the stage of the dominance of the interlingual transfer, the intralingual transfer is more prevalent. The reason is simple – learners are much more familiar with the system of the target language and their learning is therefore influenced by the nature of the target language.

The negative intralingual transfer, or overgeneralization, may be demonstrated through, for example, a wrong understanding of the rule of forming the past form of the verb and so a learner writes an incorrect form of the verb 'go' as 'goed' instead of the correct irregular past form of the verb 'went'.

3. **Context of learning** refers, according to Brown (2000), to the learning environment to which the learner is exposed as the possible source of the errors. In a school environment, the learner may be led in "a false direction" by the teacher who may, for instance, select an inappropriate approach or provide an insufficient explanation to learners.

4. **Communication strategies** as a means of transferring the message can also become a source of error. Learners of a foreign language, as Ellis (1997) describes, often face problems with expressing themselves due to a lack of knowledge. Tarone (1981) exemplifies that students can often use an incorrect approximation of words, word coinage, false cognates, and circumlocution to express the intended meaning. For instance, Ellis (1997) mentions using the expression 'picture place' instead of the correct expression 'art gallery', which is an example of constructing an entirely new word (word coinage).

Errors the students make may influence all areas of the foreign language at all linguistic levels - phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics (McManus 2022) but the degree of impact may rely on various factors that can be divided according to Gass, Behney and Plonsky (2013) into 4 categories: intrinsic learner factors (e.g. personal characteristics, motivation, learner aptitude, grit (Gass, Behney and Plonsky, 2020)), external factors of the learner (e.g. formal and non-formal learning environments (Jarvis and Pavlenko 2008)), linguistic factors (e.g. cross-linguistic similarity or difference (Hummel 2014)), and non-linguistic factors (e.g. language use itself (Gass, Behney and Plonsky 2013)).

This theoretical overview has provided a basic framework for understanding the nature of language errors and their diverse sources. The following section will build on these ideas and focus on specific research and its methodologies in the context of negative transfer, particularly in the writing of Slovak university students.

## Research Methodology

### Research Aim and Research Questions

This study aims to search and analyse the frequency of intralingual and interlingual transfer errors in the orthographic areas in the written speech of Slovak university students learning English as a foreign language. To determine this, the following research questions have been posed:

1. *What orthographic errors do Slovak university foreign language learners make in writing?*
2. *What are the most frequent orthographic errors made by Slovak university foreign language learners?*

### Research Sample

The research sample consisted of an available set of 77 full-time undergraduate students at the University of Prešov, Slovakia, in the 1st year. The student's identity was anonymised; an alphanumeric code invented by the student was used instead of their first and last name.

### Research Design

The research employed both qualitative and quantitative designs with students' written works on a selected topic and error analysis as a research tool to meet the objectives and answer the research questions. The written work aimed to document the language skills of an English language learner in a written speech on the specific topic Changes in society.

### Research Procedure

Data collection took place during English language lessons at the university. The written work was done on paper without the use of translators or the Internet. The length was intended to be a maximum of 1 A4 page (approximately 500 words). They had 30 minutes to complete the writing.

## Data analysis

The individual component of each respondent was paired with an alphanumeric code. The written work of the respondent was individually evaluated for its error rate through error analysis in areas of orthography. Each error was categorised according to its type into intralingual and interlingual transfer errors and further divided into subcategories based on their shared features. The following part will discuss each category of identified errors concerning its rate and examples.

### Intralingual errors

Table 1 – Error rate of intralingual error subcategories

Category of Intralingual Error	Error Rate
spelling	243
proper nouns capitalisation	20
capitalisation of the personal pronoun "I"	5
apostrophe	2

The Table 1 presents the error rate in the category of intralingual errors identified in the analysed written work that originated from English as the target language itself. The findings suggest that the **spelling errors (243 instances)** represent the most prevalent type of intralingual errors, significantly outnumbering all other subcategories. This high frequency suggests that learners frequently encounter challenges with the complexities and irregularities of English orthography, often leading to overgeneralisation of learned spelling rules or phonetic misinterpretations within the target language system itself. Respondents often forgot to write a letter in a word (\*aply), separated words even though they are spelt together in English (\*human kind), or followed the way a word is pronounced (thing instead of \*think, which was meant in the context of the written sentence). In the evaluation of the papers,

we noticed that the most common word whose misspelling was repeated in several texts (and was to some extent due to the topic of the written work) was \*now and days, which is correct in English nowadays, without separating the parts.

In contrast, other categories of intralingual errors, while present, occurred with substantially lower frequencies. **Proper nouns capitalisation** (20 instances) cases were indicating instances where learners might not have fully internalised the specific capitalisation conventions of English. It can be seen in the following examples: they spelled the phrase, proper noun, Ancient Greece without capitalising the initial letters, or they wrote the name of a foreign language without a capital initial letter \*english and \*slovak language instead of English, ... the Slovak language. - "I'm so bad at it - not only in English, but also in the Slovak language". According to the rules, nationalities, languages and country names are always capitalised in English.

Errors related to the **capitalisation of the personal pronoun 'I'** (5 instances) and the **use of the apostrophe** (2 instances) were found to be rare. As for the personal pronoun "I", the error in this category were, as the name suggests, related to the lower case in the personal pronoun I, which has to be always capitalised in English. The latter category of apostrophe indicates that the students were not applying the rules of apostrophe in a correct way, such as in possessive nouns (children's outfits changed).

Apart from intralingual errors, in students' written works were also identified interlingual errors.

### **Interlingual errors**

Table 2 – Error rate of interlingual error subcategories

Category of Interlingual Error	Error Rate
Quotation mark transferred from the mother tongue	10
Ordinal number form transferred from the mother tongue spelling	5
Slovak spelling of the English proper noun	2

Table 2 presents interlingual error subcategories, highlighting the cases where learners' mother tongue rules or conventions influenced their written production in English. The most frequent error observed was the negative interlingual transfer of **quotation mark rules from the mother tongue** (10 instances). This indicates that students tend to apply Slovak rules for quotation marks (e.g., using different placement „“") instead of English ones, which have a different form """, such as in the case of \*,norm of calories"; ...called \*,cheap" instead of the correct form "norm of calories" and ...called "cheap".

**Ordinal number** form transferred from **mother tongue spelling** (5 instances) suggests a tendency of learners to directly translate or adapt Slovak ordinal number structures into English, such as in the case of the expression \*20. century. In Slovak, a serial digit is followed by a full stop, in opposite to English, which expresses ordinal numerals without a full stop and instead adds the suffix -th (20th century) or uses irregular forms such as first, second and third.

The last subcategory of these errors was **Slovak spelling of English proper nouns** (2 instances). Both cases describe the situation when the proper noun Christmas, denoting a specific holiday, functions as an adjective and the adjective Mexican, which is derived from a proper noun (the name of the country Mexico), is capitalised in English, since they are both proper nouns. The literal translation of the words in Slovak would also be capitalised since they are also proper nouns, but when they function as adjectives in Slovak, they are written with a lowercase initial letter, which causes confusion and a transfer of rules from the native language into English.

## **Discussion**

After examining the individual subcategories of interlingual and intralingual errors, the next section will be devoted to discussing the results altogether concerning the research questions. Each question will be answered on the following pages.

### *1. What orthographic errors do Slovak university foreign language learners make in writing?*

The orthographic errors made by Slovak university foreign language learners can be categorised into two main types: intralingual errors and interlingual errors, which indicates that they are influenced by various sources. As for intralingual orthographic errors, they originate from learners' developing understanding and application of English rules. The most prevalent orthographic error was in spelling, with 243 instances. Students either omitted some letters, incorrectly separated words or made phonetic misinterpretations in English. The next category found in students' writings was in the area of proper nouns capitalisation (20 instances), when they often failed to apply English capitalisation conventions for proper nouns and phrases. With lower representation, it is possible to find errors related to capitalisation of the personal pronoun 'I' (5 instances) or apostrophe usage (2 instances).

As for interlingual orthographic errors, they are a direct result of the transfer of Slovak orthographic or punctuation rules into English. The most frequent error is in the subcategory of quotation mark transfer (10 instances), where students frequently applied Slovak conventions for quotation marks, which differ in form and placement from English quotation marks. Other subcategories were in ordinal number form transfer (5 instances) and Slovak spelling of English proper nouns (2 instances).

### *2. What are the most frequent orthographic errors made by Slovak university foreign language learners?*

The most frequent types made by Slovak university foreign language learners are in the area of intralingual transfer errors, specifically in spelling with 243 instances. Concerning the interlingual transfer errors, although with significantly lower representation total number of errors, the most frequent category is in quotation mark transfer from the mother tongue (10 instances). This means that learners have more difficulties in acquiring the foreign language itself, English - and make more errors stemming from unlearned or incorrectly acquired rules in the target language than from interference or negative transfer from the mother tongue.

---

## Conclusion

At the end of this paper, it is suitable to ask why these errors occurred and also why each type of error was represented in a particular way. Among the possible reasons can be the difference and complexity of the rules in English as a target language, its different irregular forms or the high number of exceptions that may depend on the context. It may also be various specific features of the target language that are not found in the mother tongue or are used in a different way, which causes confusion, and the learner has to make more effort to learn the correct form or phenomenon in English. This affects not only the speed but also the efficiency of the whole learning process.

When collecting data for the research, some respondents had difficulty expressing themselves more comprehensively in writing on a given topic. This suggests that not all learners are used to writing more extensive texts on a topic in English. Writing in a foreign language is more time-consuming, and oral expression often takes precedence in the classroom, as learners have considerable difficulty overcoming their fear of speaking in a foreign language.

In their written work, respondents often made various errors in word spellings - forgetting to write a letter, swapping letters, or separating words even though they are written together in English, even in commonly used words. This is related to the technological phenomenon of this generation. The current generation of learners is heavily connected to technology, not only in their leisure time, but also in formal school settings and in the learning process. Increasingly, learners are accustomed to using technological means (and related Internet resources) to express their ideas, prepare various assignments in school, check for accuracy through search, automatic text corrections, translation, or even transcribe their original texts according to given instructions into various AI chatbots.

Although an unavoidable trend, it has a number of pitfalls that affect the correctness of learners' speech, for example, even in their written expression. This is particularly evident in situations where they do not use any technology and write manually based on their ability to use the language, which was the case in the research for this paper. In the case of spelling, this is particularly evident, as when students have automatic editing turned on or use various grammar tools that automatically correct the word and any error in it for them, or suggest a correction, a substitution of a word or a whole sentence (for fluency or correctness of the word order). Over-reliance on autocorrect can also cause them to fail to check and reread the text themselves, creating more errors.

Given the popularity of these grammar correction tools, it is difficult, if not impossible, to prevent learners from checking a word, sentence or entire text. The teacher's ability to check the learner's actual knowledge in writing in a foreign language, other than in the classroom and without using technology, is therefore very limited. These realities are thus significantly changing how education is delivered - how pupils learn, what strategies the teacher uses for teaching, and how teachers subsequently assess pupil performance.

The results of this research suggest that orthographic errors are present in students' written performances, and we need to pay more attention to the area of spelling, which proved to be the most problematic area.

---

## References

- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New York: Longman.
- Brown, H. D. (2014). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Ellis, R. (1997). *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Jarvis, S., & Pavlenko, A. (2008). *Crosslinguistic influence in language and cognition*. Routledge: New York.
- Jaszolt, K. (1995). In: D. H. Brown, *Principles of language learning and teaching*. New York: Longman.
- Gass, S. M., Behney, J., & Plonsky, L. (2013). *Second Language Acquisition An Introductory Course*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Gass, S. M., Behney, J., & Plonsky, L. (2020). *Second Language Acquisition An Introductory Course*. New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis.
- Hummel, K. M., (2014). *Introducing Second Language Acquisition Perspectives and Practices. First edition*. England: Wiley Blackwell.
- McManus (2022). *Crosslinguistic Influence and Second Language Learning*. New York; Oxon: Routledge Taylor & Francis.
- Tarone, E. (1981). *Some Thoughts on the Notion of Communication Strategy*. TESOL Quarterly, 15, 285-295.
- Thornbury, S. (1999). *How to Teach Grammar*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.