

INTERFERENCES INVOLVING ALBANIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH IN AN ITALIAN CLASSROOM CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

A lot of comparative studies regarding the learning of two or more languages have shown that learning a second language cannot be done independently from the first one. During the intermediate phase (interlanguage), when languages are relatively similar to each other, there are a lot of transfers from the first language to the second one. However only a few studies are dealing with the interferences between foreign languages. In this research paper we present some findings regarding the transfers from English (first foreign language) to Italian (second foreign language). We are searching some answers regarding the following questions: Does the English language interfere with the Italian language? If so, which of the grammatical structures (morphology, syntax, lexicology and phonetic) are the most affected ones? Are these transfers positive or negative; temporarily or do they last long? The data used are obtained primarily from the student's writing papers (as objective indicators) and observations throughout a full academic year. Having concluded that our target group does not have a strong English accent, only a few data are acquired from the student's oral presentations. The questionnaires are another useful tool; these were used to collect information regarding the student's awareness on the transfers that their English language has on the Italian language. Although the interferences between English and Italian can slow down the communication in the latter one, we can conclude that in most of the cases, they are not serious enough to affect it.

Key words: language interferences, language transfers, English language, Italian language, communication.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the Albanian school system offers the teaching of at least two foreign languages. The second foreign language teaching is offered three years after learning the first foreign language. Languages offered in our schools are languages that belong

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to the family of Indo-European languages, such as Italian, French, English and German. On rare occasions languages that belong to other families (Turkish, Russian, Chinese, etc.) are offered as well; these are mainly provided by private schools or universities. The clash of two or more language systems makes them interfere with each other. Studies based on language comparative analysis, initially proposed by the American researcher Robert Lado and supported by many others, have shown that comparable language units such as words, sentences, sounds, etc. are easily transferable. Transfer takes place not only from the first language to the second one, but also from one foreign language to the other.

According to Freddi (1994), learning a second (or foreign) language for the very complexity it poses, should be considered as a variant of the first language learning process. This is because it is very hard to determine if the learning process of another language follows the same pattern as that of the native language. This approach confirms once again the thesis of Corder (1973, as cited in Freddi, 1994) that learning a second language is an adaptation or extension of the knowledge and competences obtained during the acquisition of the first language (L1).

According to Calvi (2010), the knowledge acquired in the first language serves not only as a reference point for presenting hypothesis in the foreign language, but also as an obstacle and a source of interference, especially when they show apparent analogies with one another. Even when languages have similarities, apart from the possibility of transfers (positive and negative) of the language forms, there is a risk of considering them like two codes merged as one, a phenomenon confirmed also by different studies in neurolinguistics (Calvi, 2007).

THE STUDY

In this study, we will look over the interference that English has in learning Italian by Albanian students. Although they are a part in the Indo-European families, all these languages (Albanian, English, Italian) belong to different branches. They reveal a few analogies with one another in either the deep structure (as proposed by Chomsky) or the superficial one. In this case, the transfer is mostly negative or nil, but according to Wilkins (1973, as cited in Calvi, 2007), this does not imply the process of learning a second or a third language is reached in a shorter time.

Newman (2001) says that: "The transfer of some language units from one system to another happens due to "the ignorance", i.e. the lack of knowing the rules needed to perform in another language". The higher the level of the first language, the higher the rate of transfers in the second one; the same is true for one foreign language to the other, especially at the initial level.

The performance in the mother tongue is one of the most important factors in determining the interference degree in the second language. As Titone (1972, as cited in Shehu, 2016) says, knowing two or more languages, enables linguistic and cognitive strategy for "comparing two or more language systems", apart from enriching the individual culturally and mentally.

As mentioned above, with the help of questionnaires and tests, provided by English language colleagues, we determined the level of our target group. In a high percentage, students have an average level of English; a small percentage have a basic level and very few have elementary knowledge. In addition to English knowledge; three students have good skills in French learned from them at school; two of them have good skills in Greek as a second language after living in Greece; one student has basic skills in Spanish, taught through television. Regarding the Italian language only 6% of students have basic skills (A1) and 4% of them are at an A2 / B1(+) level.

Some of the data concerning English interferences in Italian are obtained from student's tests in grammatical structures and others from oral texts (in written form) in topics such as: "Presenting ourselves and others", "Describing our daily routine" etc. In oral texts the interferences from English to Italian are of different types. The examples that follow are taken from the students' original works. (For ethical reasons, students will be named: Maria 1, Maria 2, etc.

One of the most common transfer that occurs throughout the whole course of Italian is the repetition of the personal pronoun as a subject in every sentence. Italian belongs to that group of languages in which the use of subject is optional. Italian grammar books recommend not to use personal pronouns as subjects. For example, it is recommended to use: "*Ho visto una gatta nera*" instead of "*Io ho visto una gatta nera*".

In Italian language, the repetition of personal pronouns as a subject is done in special occasions (Battista, 1996). Not knowing these rules of Italian, students apply that of English, where the personal pronoun is repeated in every sentence. In Italian language the repetition of the personal pronoun as a subject, both in written and oral texts, slows down the rhythm of the communication and makes it boring at the same time.

Maria 1: "Mi chiamo Maria 1. Io sono albanese, io vive a Elbasan. Io studia la lingua inglese. Io sono 18 anni. Io ho capelli lunghi e ricci. Io ho due sorella. Lei sono sposato è ho tre nipote."; Maria 2: "**Io** sono Maria 2. **Io** sono diciotto ani. **Io** studiare Inglese a Aleksander Xhuvani. **Io** sono alta, ho cappeli lungi. **Io** piacere lexere."; Maria 3: "**Io** sono Maria 3. **Io** sono 18 ani. **Io** vivo a Elbasan. In mia famiglia chi sono 4 persone. Mia mama, mio papa e il mio piccolo fratello. **Io** studio l'Inglese all'università. **Io** ho dei capelli oscuri e corti. **Io** ho dei occhiali perche sono miope."; Maria 4: "**Io** sono Maria 4. **Io** sono Albanese di Elbasan. **Io** sono lunga, con capelli brune, con i occhio marrone".

In Italian language textbooks, some grammatical exercises inquire the students to complete the sentences with the correct form of the verb; every infinitive form of the verb is associated with a personal pronoun, e.g. (io / parlare) which is used to guide the students, especially at the first basic level. The sentences in these exercises are a part of the oral communication and they do not necessarily require a personal pronoun. What we have found is that students repeat personal pronouns as subjects, in almost every sentence proposed in the exercises. It might seem that this is due to the excessive use of the personal pronouns associated with the verb or simply as a mechanical repetition of the conjugation forms (e.g. io parlo, tu parli, lui/lei parla, noi parliamo, voi parlate, loro parlano). In fact, the same situation is observed even in the oral texts, as we have already mentioned above. Thus we conclude that the main reason of repeating personal pronouns as subjects is in fact, the interference from English.

The exercise: completate il dialogo

Marta 1: "(tu/potere) **Tu** puoi telefonare a Maria?/ Puoi telefonare a Maria?"; Marta 2: "(io/dovere) **Io** devo lavorare molto/ Devo lavorare molto."

Another issue, found throughout the written and oral exercises mentioned above, is the use of the infinitive in all persons. In Italian, the conjugation is a grammatical feature of the verb. So, the person, the number (singular or plural), the tense and the form of the verbs are distinguished by different endings all using a vowel as their last letter. Here are some examples taken from student assignments:

Giuseppe 1: "Io **preferire** aiutare .../ Preferisco aiutare ..."; Giuseppe 2: "Keiko **studiare** l'italiano/ Keiko studia l'italiano."; Giuseppe 3: "Francesca **pensare** di .../ Francesca pensa di ..."; Giuseppe 4: "Io preferire aiutare gli altri/ Preferisco aiutare gli altri."

While learning Italian language, the Albanian students often incorrectly use the verb "essere" instead of the verb "avere" when telling their age. Doing so, in Albanian and English, one must use the verb "to be".(e.g. "Jam 15 vjeç (alb) / I am 15 years old (eng) / Ho 15 anni (it), or "Sono una ragazza di 18 anni"). In this case, we have concluded that this is a result from both English and Albanian interferences.

Another observed interference from English is the incorrect use of nouns and adjectives in plural. In the Italian language this is accomplished by means of endings. In the following examples one can easily see that the grammatical numbers "two", "three" etc are incorrectly followed by a noun in singular form. The following

examples were taken from student's assignments in topics such as: Describe your house / What's in your bag?

Mario 1: "Io ho grande familia, papa, mamma e due fratello. Io ho nonno, nonna, **tre zio** e un zia. Il mio pappa **sichiamo** ..., mia mamma **sichiama** ..., Mio grande fratello chi chiamo ... e mio piccolo fratello **chichiama** ..."; Mario 2: "In la mia camera/ nella mia camera."; Mario 3: "Ne la mia borsa chi sono: libro, **tre quaderno**, chi sono il mio telefonio."; Mario 4: "Nella mia borsa c'e uno portogoglio, c'i sono **quattro libro**, c'e uno telephono, ci sono **due penna.**"; Mario 5: "In mio zaino/ nel mia zaino ...".

In the above examples there are some other errors as well:

- the lack of definite articles – lo, la, gli, le, l' – before countable and uncountable nouns: papa/ il papà, libro/il libro;
- the incorrect use of articulated prepositions: ne la/ nella;
- subject-verb disagreement in person: il mio pappa chi chiamo/ il mio papà si chiama;
- orthographic errors of different types, such as interlingual error: c'e/ c'è or c'i sono/ ci sono and phonetic ones as in case of Mario 1: the reflexive verb *si chiama* is written in two different forms, *sichiama* and *chichiama*. The reflexive verb *si chiama* is perceived by the ear as a single phonetic unit – which is in fact true [sikkj'a:ma] – and for that reason it is written incorrectly as a single word (*sichiama*). As for *chichiama*, the student is not aware of the grapheme-phoneme correspondence in Italian.

Transfers from English are also found in syntax structure. The most frequent one is that of the position of adjectives in a sentence. Here are some examples:

Anna 1: "In libero tempo/ nel tempo libero/ in the free time."; Anna 2: "Mi piache Inglese lingua/ Mi piace la lingua inglese/ I like the English language."; Anna 3: "Io ho lungi capelli e blu occhi/ Ho i capelli lunghi e gli occhi azzurri/ I have long hair and blue eyes."; Anna 4: "Il cinema è di fronte a mia casa/ the cinema is in front of my house."; Anna 5: "Mio preferito mese è dicembre perche e mio complanno/ my favorite month is December/ Il mio mese preferito è dicembre".

Another orthographic error commonly encountered in Italian by English students is the use of capital letters with nouns and adjectives that describe nationality, as in the following examples:

Giuseppe 1: "Io sono di nazionalità **Albanese**/ Io sono di nazionalità albanese."; Giuseppe 2: "Io studio all'università per la lingua **Albanese**/ Studio all'università lingua albanese."; Giuseppe 3: "Mi piace lingua **Inglese** e **Italiana**/ Mi piace la lingua inglese e quella italiana".

Two errors were noticed in the sentence "*Eh, sono non troppo bene*". The first error relates to the position of "*non*" in Italian and the second one is the interlingual error: *essere/stare*. The correct sentence would be: "*Eh, non sto troppo bene*".

Regarding the lexis we have found some interesting transfers from English to Italian. As Weinreich (1971, as cited in Calvi, 2010) says, the lexis is the area where intercultural exchange mainly takes place. Thus, some foreign terms or particular idiomatic structures enter the system of another language in their original form or in an adopted one. In our research we have found them both. In the following examples, the students use English words or syntagmas, when they cannot find the corresponding one in Italian. In other situations the students use similar phonetic and graphemic forms. French to Italian transfers are also found in two examples.

Lucia 1: "Noi andiamo insieme al cinema, guardiamo il **cartoon, etc**/ Andiamo sempre insieme al cinema, oppure a casa guardiamo i cartoni animati, ecc."; Lucia 2: "Il momento del mio 18th compleanno/ Il momento del mio diciottesimo anniversario."; Lucia 3: "Nel mio **free time** faccio passeggiata/ Nel mio tempo libero faccio una passeggiata".

Transfer examples due to phonetic and graphemic analogy. For example:

Carlo 1: "Faccio una passeggiata al park e poi vado a casa/ Faccio una passeggiata al parco e poi vado a casa."; Carlo 2: "Io sono una persona **activa**/ Io sono una persona attiva."; Carlo 3: "Il mio **moment** piu importante della mia vita è stato quando arrivato in Albania mio nipote [...] un **moment** importante perche lui non conoscere me/ il momento più importante della mia vita è stato quando mio nipote è arrivato in Albania/ È stato un un momento importante ..."; Carlo 4: "La altra sorella vive in **Turkey** e studia Inglese/ L'altra sorella vive in Turchia a studia inglese."; Carlo 5: "Il mio mese preferito è **genario**/ Il mio mese preferito è gennaio."; Carlo 6: "... poi torno a casa, **take a break**, e studio per domani/ ... poi torno a casa, mi riposo e studio per il giorno dopo".

The questionnaire that follows was completed by the students at the end of the first semester:

1. What are the difficulties you have faced while learning Italian?

On top of the challenges students have listed the grammar: in a high percentage they set aside the use of determinative articles (il, lo, la l', etc.). Then the list continues with the use of the present indicative of regular and irregular verbs; the use of

personal pronouns short forms, specially that of third person, single and plural and the use of prepositions. They also focus attention on the difficulties they have in speaking – the use of proper accent and handling long words in Italian. Only 10% of them say they do not face any difficulty.

2. Does the English language help you in learning Italian, or do you find it as a disadvantage?

The majority of the students emphasize the fact that English helps, for example, they find it easier to learn words with the same roots with the corresponding ones in English or when they attend an Italian class, they can understand a lot of words of grammatical structures, because of their English skills. Only a small percentage of the students says their English makes it harder for them to learn Italian grammar and lexis and especially a correct pronunciation. Two of the students say they get confused by the use of two foreign languages.

3. While in an Italian class, do you prefer to speak Albanian or English?

Students react in different ways regarding this issue. The majority of them refers to Albanian when dealing with grammatical structures of Italian. 18% of the students say they think in English while dealing with grammatical structures and lexis as well; as they say, this is because they spend a lot of time in English classes during the day. 12% of the students say they do not refer neither English nor Albanian, because they feel confident in Italian.

CONCLUSIONS

Although there are a lot of studies regarding the transfers from one language to another, there are still a lot of ongoing discussions about what causes them and which strategies are followed for applying those transfers. In this paper we have revealed some of their causes and strategies such as, the extended time students spend with their English classes, the similarity present in both languages regarding word spelling and pronunciation, the lack of a complete knowledge of the rules governing the grammar structures of Italian.

As we have shown, the transfers from English to Italian are more frequent than those from Albanian to Italian. Unconsciously, the Albanian students think of learning Albanian as a completed process. This makes them see English and Italian as a single language system and therefore the transfers between those languages are the dominant ones.

The language transfers affect all the structures of the language, especially grammatical structures – morphology and syntax. In spite of that, they do not completely interfere with communication but they slow down the rhythm of it.

Findings in this study will help the Italian language teacher of English students, prepare themselves in dealing with transfers from English to Italian.

Such a comparative study between two languages will also be very useful to the English students learning Italian, firstly by making them aware of their possible presences and then orienting them towards a self-correcting process.

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