Native Language Interference
A study of interference patterns in Swedish students’ English writing

Termin: Vårterminen 2006
Handledare: Thorsten Schröter
Abstract


Författare: Skoog, Petra
Engelska C, 2006

Abstract: The purpose of this investigation was to find out if there are any patterns of native language interference in Swedish students’ written English. Extensive research has been carried out in the area of native language influence on the target language and a large number of terms are used when the influence of the native language is discussed, including contrastive analysis and positive and negative transfer. These are described in the theoretical background section of this study. The material for the empirical investigation was collected from students in year eight at a secondary school. They were given a task consisting in free essay writing, so that a general picture of interference problems would emerge. 42 essays were handed in, containing about 201 interference errors. The total number of non-interference errors found in the students’ essays was 1115 and this suggests that interference errors are not especially common among the students in my investigation. The errors committed due to interference mainly concerned the use of prepositions. One conclusion that can be drawn from this investigation is that it is very difficult to determine the source of errors and separate between errors in general and interference errors.

Nyckelord: Foreign language learning, native language influence, errors, interference.
# Table of Contents

1. Introduction and Aims ................................................................. 1

2. Theoretical Background ............................................................... 2
   2.1 Contrastive Analysis .............................................................. 2
   2.2 Transfer ................................................................................. 4
   2.3 Interlanguage ......................................................................... 6
   2.4 Kinds of errors typically committed by Swedish learners of English ........................................ 8

3. Material and Method ................................................................. 10
   3.1 Participants and material ....................................................... 10
   3.2 Classification of errors ......................................................... 11

4. Results .................................................................................... 13
   4.1 Non-interference errors ....................................................... 14
      4.1.1 Article-related errors .................................................... 14
      4.1.2 Lexis-related errors ...................................................... 15
      4.1.3 Noun-related errors ...................................................... 15
      4.1.4 Preposition-related errors .......................................... 16
      4.1.5 Spelling-related errors ................................................. 16
      4.1.6 Verb-related errors ..................................................... 17
   4.2 Interference errors .............................................................. 17
      4.2.1 Prepositions ................................................................. 18
      4.2.2 The distinction between adjective and adverb ................ 19
      4.2.3 Article .......................................................................... 19
      4.2.4 Nouns .......................................................................... 20
      4.2.5 Verb form ................................................................. 21
      4.2.6 Clause-related errors ............................................... 21
      4.2.7 Lexis ........................................................................... 21

5. Discussion and Conclusion ................................................... 22

References ................................................................................. 26
1. INTRODUCTION AND AIMS

In Swedish schools today children are required to study at least one foreign language. Learning a new language involves new grammatical rules, sounds et cetera. One problem that can affect learners of foreign languages, both positively and negatively, is their mother tongue. Second language learners tend to rely on structures of their native language to produce target language utterances and this can be both a help and a hindrance. For example, there is no inflection for person or number in Swedish verbs and students learning English therefore tend to drop the third person singular -s. This can lead to errors such as *the boy with blue shoes run fast.* Another example of mother tongue influence is the following sentence found in a student’s essay: *Please don’t be angry on me.* The influence from Swedish is obvious in the direct translation of the preposition på into on instead of at or with. A German learning English might produce this translation: *yesterday have I the letter not written.* This error is due to the fact that the learner relies on the word order of German, which differs from the English word order. Most of the time, learners of a second language are not aware of the fact that they fall back on the structures of their mother tongue.

Among linguists opinions differ concerning the significance of mother tongue influence on second language acquisition. In the past some researchers virtually denied the existence of native language influence (Odlin 1989:3). However, today most linguists are convinced that the mother tongue can affect foreign-language learners. Linguists call this process of influence from the mother tongue transfer, which is also known as cross-linguistic influence. This process can occur in all aspects of language including the vocabulary, grammar and spelling. When transfer results in something correct because the rules of the first and the second language overlap, this is referred to as positive transfer. By contrast, when transfer results in something incorrect this is referred to as negative transfer, also known as interference (Dulay et al 1982:101).

---

1 The * symbol indicates that this sentence is ungrammatical.
The main aim of this paper is to determine if there are any patterns of native language interference in Swedish students’ written English. In order to do this I have collected essays from students in grade eight at a secondary school, gone through them and analysed the errors.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Extensive research has been carried out in the area of native language influence on the target language, including interference. However, there has not been agreement on a definition of the term *interference*. One explanation for this might be the large number of competing terms used in the discussions. Such terms include *contrastive analysis*, which was the first method used when studying interference, *error analysis*, which was developed when linguists began to question the validity of contrastive analysis, and *positive* and *negative transfer*, with the latter denoting more or less the same phenomena as *interference*. Finally, *interlanguage* is a term used when second language learners’ produce results which are neither fully native-language-like nor target-language-like.

In this background section I will offer a more detailed discussion of the terms mentioned and present different researchers’ views concerning native language interference. I will also show how linguistic studies of interference have developed over time.

2.1 Contrastive Analysis

During the 1940s and 1950s most errors were ascribed to interference and consequently a major part of applied linguistic research was devoted to comparing the mother tongue and the target language in order to predict or explain the errors made by learners with particular linguistic backgrounds (Corder 1981:1). This approach was the first to elucidate the problems of interference and was referred to as contrastive analysis. Contrastive analysis influenced the field of applied linguistics and second language learning for over two decades. But eventually, many linguists abandoned contrastive analysis and adopted a more positive view of the role of the first language in second language acquisition (Dulay et al 1982:97). Yet, it is still important to understand this
approach because it shaped so much early linguistic research and therefore underlies much current second language teaching methodology and material (Dulay et al 1982:97).

Contrastive analysis assumed that a learner’s first language interferes with his or her acquisition of a second language, and that it therefore constitutes the major obstacle to successful mastery of the new language (Dulay et al 1982:97). Lightbown & Spada give a similar explanation:

Contrastive analysis hypothesis predicts that where there are similarities between the first and the second languages, the learner will acquire second language structures with ease; where there are differences, the learner will have difficulty (Lightbown & Spada 1997:23).

Comparing the mother tongue and the target language was considered useful for teachers, who could predict learner errors beforehand, and thus prevent them (Heny 1994:162). However, contrastive analysis was also criticised by those who considered it impossible to predict when the errors would be made. Furthermore, the errors which learners commonly made in class were not necessarily the ones predicted by contrastive analysis. There were errors that could not be explained simply by noting the differences between the languages involved, and sometimes the errors that a contrastive analysis did predict were not found in practice (Allwright & Bailey 1991:83). Contrastive analysis was considered misleading as a basis for teaching, since it encouraged the idea that first language influence was the only thing that caused learners’ errors (Heny 1994:165).

Further questioning of the relevance of contrastive analysis was the result of the classification of learners’ errors in studies that became known as error analyses (Odlin 1989:18). These kinds of studies were developed during the 1970’s and involved a detailed description and analysis of the kinds of errors second language learners make. The goal of this research was to discover what learners really know about the language (Lightbown & Spada 1997:55). The difference between these two methods was that error
analysis did not set out to predict errors on the basis of interference from the native language. Rather, it sought to discover and describe the different kinds of errors in an effort to understand how learners acquire the foreign language. One of the main challenges for error analysts was to decide what category to assign a particular error to. For example, omitting an article in English may possibly be a case of simplification (see section 2.3) with a Spanish speaker but a case of transfer with a Korean speaker (Odlin 1989:19). Lightbown & Spada (1997:55) also point out that error analysis was based on the theory that the speech of second language learners is a system in its own right, one which is rule governed and predictable and very much like the system of young first language learners.

2.2 Transfer

There is a large number of terms used in discussions of the influence of the native language on a second language. One of these terms is transfer, which is also known as cross-linguistic influence. Some researchers virtually denied the existence of language transfer and others have been sceptical about its importance. Yet there are also researchers who have argued for the importance of transfer and have gone so far as to consider it the paramount fact of second language acquisition (Odlin 1989:3). However, a more balanced perspective has emerged by now, in which the role of transfer is acknowledged and in which transfer is seen to interact with a host of other factors not yet fully understood (Odlin 1989:9). The general view is that language transfer is not an ‘all or nothing’ phenomenon as was thought in the earlier days of contrastive analysis (Selinker 1992:207).

A definition of the term transfer is given by Gass & Selinker (2001:66): “It is a term that was used extensively in the first half of the century and refers to the psychological process whereby prior knowledge is carried over into a new learning situation.” Odlin (1989:27) offers another definition of transfer for the context of applied linguistics: “Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired.” However, Odlin (1989:28) also says that it is difficult to give a precise and
correct definition of transfer as long as there is no existing adequate definition of language.

While there are many definitions of transfer, the concept can be divided into positive and negative transfer. Both types of transfer refer to the automatic and subconscious use of old behaviour in new learning situations (Dulay et al 1982:101). Positive transfer results in correct performance because the new behaviour is the same, and as appropriate as, the old (Dulay et al 1982:101). According to Odlin (1989:36), the effects of positive transfer are only determinable through comparison of the success of groups with different native languages. Such comparison often shows that cross-linguistic similarities can produce positive transfer in several ways. Similarities between native language and target language vocabulary can reduce the time needed to develop good reading comprehension. Similarities between vowel systems can make the identification of vowel sounds easier. Similarities between writing systems can give learners a head start in reading and writing the target language. And similarities in syntactic structures can facilitate the acquisition of grammar. Learners speaking a language with a syntax similar to that of the target language tend to have less difficulty with, for example, articles, word order, and relative clauses (Odlin 1989:36).

In contrast, negative transfer refers to those instances of transfer which result in errors because old, habitual behaviour is different from that to be learned (Dulay et al 1982:101). Negative transfer involves divergences from norms in the target language and it is often relatively easy to identify. Although negative transfer tends to be associated with production errors, there are other ways in which an individual’s second language performance may differ from the behaviour of native speakers. Some examples of these are underproduction, overproduction and misinterpretation (Odlin 1989:37).

Underproduction occurs when learners produce few or no examples of target language structure. The utterances learners produce may contain rather few errors, but if a certain structure is used less frequently than it is in the language of native speakers, this infrequency constitutes a divergence from target language norms. There is good evidence
for one form of underproduction related to language distance: avoidance. If learners sense that particular structures in the target language are very different from their counterparts in the native language, they may try to avoid using those structures. For example, Chinese and Japanese students of ESL tend to use fewer relative clauses than students whose languages have relative clause structures more like those of English (Odlin 1989:37). Odlin (1989:37) explains that overproduction is a consequence of underproduction. For example, in an attempt to avoid relative clauses, Japanese students may violate norms of written prose in English by writing too many simple sentences. But overproduction can also occur for other reasons. For example, the use of apologies seems to be more common in American English than Hebrew and English speakers learning Hebrew appear to follow the customs of their native language in making apologies (Odlin 1989:37).

The native language can influence the interpretation of target language messages, and sometimes that influence leads to learners inferring something very different from what speakers of the target language would infer. Misinterpretation may occur, for example, when native and target language word-order patterns or cultural assumptions differ (Odlin 1989:37).

Gass & Selinker (2001:68) consider the terms positive and negative transfer debatable. The question is whether transfer can be positive or negative at all: “The terms refer to the product, although the use implies a process. There is a process of transfer; there is not a negative or positive transfer.” Both Dulay et al (1982:101) and Heny (1994:164) are instead questioning how one can know exactly what is being transferred. Is it principles, word-patterns or sound? However, while it appears to be difficult to determine exactly what is being transferred, most linguists do agree that the mother tongue can affect learners’ English in several ways (Swan & Smith 2001:11).

### 2.3 Interlanguage

Interlanguage is the type of language produced by second and foreign language learners who are in the process of learning a new language. The idea of an interlanguage was first introduced by Nemser and Briere in the 1960s, but is best known through the work of
Larry Selinker (Malmkjær 2004:83). The term *interlanguage* was coined in the belief that the language learner’s language was a sort of hybrid between his or her first language and the target language. The evidence of this was the large number of errors which could be ascribed to the process of transfer. But when second language acquisition researchers began to collect data from learners not receiving formal instruction, particularly children, the production of transfer errors was generally found to be quite small. Clearly interlanguage was not simply a hybrid language but had a developmental history of its own (Corder 1981:2). Some of the structures produced by the learners are to be found neither in their first language nor in the language they are learning, i.e. no native speaker of either language ever produces them (Malmkjær 2004:83). Lightbown & Spada (1997:122) explain that interlanguage is systematic, but also dynamic and continually evolving as learners receive more input and revise their hypotheses about the second language.

How do the learners develop their interlanguage? There are a number of basic processes that the learners adopt to help them acquire the target language (Mason). The first process is language transfer, i.e. when the learner uses her or his first language as a resource (see section 2.2). Secondly, overgeneralization takes place when the learner of a foreign language uses a grammatical rule in situations where a native speaker would not. This can occur at a number of levels. Thus at the phonetic level, for example, learners of British English, after having mastered the pronunciation of the English /r/, may take to placing it at the end of words, although in RP at least it is not pronounced in this position. Overgeneralization can also occur at the grammatical level where a learner in the early stages may use nothing but the present tense. Later, there may be extensive, non-native use of progressive forms. Furthermore, overgeneralization can take place at the lexical level. Learners tend to use certain terms and stretch their meaning: thus a goose might be referred to as a *chicken*, or a teaspoon may be a *little spoon*. Finally, overgeneralization can occur at the level of discourse, i.e. lexical items and expressions may be used in inappropriate social contexts (Mason). For example, someone learning German as a second language and who has been staying with a friendly family may find themselves
saying *du* (the German equivalent of *you*) to strangers. This is considered to be acceptable when talking to friends but inappropriate according to German norms.

The final basic process is simplification, both syntactic and semantic. Simplification takes place when the learner uses speech that resembles that of very young children. This may be either because they cannot, in fact, as yet produce the target forms, or because they do not feel sure of them (Mason).

### 2.4 Kinds of errors typically committed by Swedish learners of English

The following is a brief overview of the major types of errors which Swedish learners of English commonly produce. These errors have been categorized as grammar errors by Swan & Smith (2001:26).

**Order of constituents:** In Swedish it is common to begin a sentence with something other than the subject – which is then placed after the verb. In English, only adverbials are regularly ‘fronted’, and this does not generally cause subject-verb inversion. To give prominence to objects, complements, etc., English tends to use intonation. A typical mistake would be:

*That have I not seen* (Swan & Smith 2001:26).

**Construction with *it* and *there***: In Swedish the equivalent of the *there*-construction is based on the pronoun *det*, which also means ‘it’. Beginners tend to overuse *it* as a consequence:

*It is somebody at the door* (Swan & Smith 2001:27).

What corresponds to the *there*-construction in Swedish is used with a wide range of verbs (whereas in English it is commonly used with *be* as a main verb). This results in mistakes like:

*It/There happens something strange here quite often.*

*It/There was shot a man here yesterday* (Swan & Smith 2001:27).
Position of adverbs: In Swedish, mid-sentence adverbs are generally placed after the finite verb. This leads to mistakes in English sentences with one-word verbs:
*Children leave often home nowadays* (Swan & Smith 2001:27).

Nouns – countability and number: The countable/uncountable distinction is found in Swedish, but there are some differences of distribution which give rise to problems:
*informations
*an advice
*a work (for a job)* (Swan & Smith 2001:27).
In some cases where English nouns are in the plural, singular nouns are used in the Swedish language. Possible mistakes include:
*a pyjama
*a scissor
*the police is on its way* (Swan & Smith 2001:28).

Articles: The definite article occurs in Swedish in connection with uncountable and plural nouns used in a general sense. In English it is normal to use no article in these cases. This leads to errors like:
*Some people always blame the society for everything.
*The horses were introduced into America by Spanish soldiers* (Swan & Smith 2001:28).

Adjective or adverb: Swedish adverbs of manner tend to be similar in form to adjectives, which leads to frequent mistakes:
*She spoke to me quite polite* (Swan & Smith 2001:29).

The opposite mistake can occur in sentences with the verbs look, sound, smell, taste, and feel, which in most cases take adverbs, not adjectives, in Swedish:
*I feel terribly* (Swan & Smith 2001:29).

Verb forms: There is no inflection for person or number in Swedish. Consequently learners tend to drop the third-person -s.
He fly to Copenhagen twice a week (Swan & Smith 2001:30).

**Prepositions:** In Swedish a preposition can be followed by an *att*-clause (the equivalent of an English *that*-clause). This may lead to errors like:
*He convinced me of that he was innocent.*
*They insisted on that they knew nothing about it* (Swan & Smith 2001:33).

The highly frequent preposition *i* is often used where English uses other prepositions than *in*. This leads to errors like:
*The floor in the house.*
*Go in school* (Swan & Smith 2001:33).

As can be seen in the examples above learners’ English is likely to carry the signature of their mother tongue. This influence is also obvious in the case of pronunciation where the phonological structure of a speaker’s first language usually affects her or his English speech quite strongly. However, Swedish is phonologically quite similar to English, and most features of English pronunciation do not in general cause difficulties for speakers of Swedish (Swan & Smith 2001:21). However, notable exceptions can be found, for example /z/ is typically replaced by /s/ and Swedes pronounce *racer* for *razor*. Moreover, /ʤ/ does not occur in Swedish and is instead often pronounced as /j/ as *year* for *jeer* (Swan & Smith 2001:23).

3. MATERIAL AND METHOD

3.1 Participants and material

The major aim of this investigation was to find out if there are any patterns of native language interference in Swedish students’ written English. In order to do this I collected essays from students in grade eight at a secondary school. Since the students were under the age of fifteen I needed the parents’ consent before I could use the essays for my investigation. A note was handed out to the parents with a detailed account of the
investigation and its aim. There was also a statement that the students’ names would not be revealed and that the essays would thus be totally anonymous. In fact, I gave them numbers in order to keep them apart.

The school in which I did my investigation is situated in a small town in Sweden. The total number of students studying at the school, in grades seven to nine, is 219. In Sweden, English is studied from fourth grade and onwards and the students who participated in this study were thus in their fifth year of formal English studies. The total number of participants was 42 students from three classes, with the same teacher responsible for all three classes. The participants were all native Swedes who have Swedish as their mother tongue and study English as a foreign language.

The students worked with the subject of music during a four-week period and the time they spent on this each week was 120 minutes. One of the activities was to work with song lyrics. The students were subsequently going to use the song lyrics as inspiration for the essays that I collected for my investigation. 24 students wrote their essays on a computer, with the help of a spell and grammar checker, and the remaining 18 essays were written by hand. The time the students spent writing their essays varied between approximately 30 minutes and three to four hours. Most of the students wrote their essays by themselves, without asking the teacher for help, and afterwards handed them in to the teacher. However, it was permitted to ask the teacher for help and to use aids such as dictionaries.

3.2 Classification of errors

As a first step in the analysis of the students’ essays, I marked the following types of errors:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of error</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Article related</td>
<td><em>My name is Zuzu and I am a old man.</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The first skill I will discuss is listening. The animals with consciousness have feelings and goals for their existence. I worked at a hotel and then in a clothes shop. I think he is a fascinating character because he makes such big progress throughout the text.

2. Lexis-related

inappropriate word or expression *He dead many people.
word/expression missing *What? Amy backed from Jack.
word/expression redundant *I need to expand my word vocabulary.

3. Noun-related

genitive *It is Saras book you are reading
number *The couple David and Harriet have decided how their lives together should be.

4. Preposition-related

inappropriate preposition *Her hair ended with her hips.
missing preposition *After 40 years hard work
redundant preposition *Aunt Paula died for four years ago.

5. Spelling

inappropriate spelling *He sad to her that he liked her.

6. Verb-related

verb form *I were the last man on the list.
In order to find out if the students’ essays contained any interference errors, I obviously needed to decide which kinds of errors should be counted as such. In Learner English, Swan & Smith (2001) discuss errors typically produced by Swedish learners of English, due to the influence of their mother tongue (see section 2.4). The errors that I analysed as interference errors and that can be found in Swan & Smith (2001:26-35) concern the following areas:2

1. Prepositions
2. The distinction adjective/adverb
3. Articles
4. Nouns
5. Verb forms
6. Clause-related
7. Lexis

The last group of errors that was analysed was classified as lexical errors. This group includes the inappropriate use and confusion of lexical items, for example *and the arrow hit the whiting (white man) in the head.

It should be mentioned that I have only marked when the students produced something incorrect. Since I do not know how many times they produced something correct, I can only guess whether the students had normally mastered the grammatical features in question or not.

4. RESULTS

In the following sections (4.1-4.2.7) I will present the results of my investigation, following the order introduced in the method section. That is, I will start with an analysis of non-interference errors and proceed to an analysis of interference errors.

---

2 For further details see section 2.4.
4.1 Non-interference errors

The total number of essays that were analysed is 42 and the total number of words the students wrote was 22,035, with an average of 524 words per essay. As can be seen in Table 1 below, the total number of errors not due to interference is considered to be 1115 according to my analysis, with an average of 26.6 errors per essay. The smallest number of errors found in a student’s essay was two and the highest was 124. Since the essays varied between 130 words and 3,000 words in length, I decided to count how many errors the students made in their first 100 words. Two of the students made no errors whereas one student made 21 errors in the first 100 words. However, on average the students produced 7 errors in their first 100 words.

Table 1: No. of non-interference errors in the students’ essays, classified according to category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Lexis</th>
<th>Noun</th>
<th>Preposition</th>
<th>Spelling</th>
<th>Verb</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sum</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>490</td>
<td>277</td>
<td>1115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average no.</td>
<td>1.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>11.7</td>
<td>6.6</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>per essay</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>20.1</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>43.9</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>total no. of</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>errors</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1.1 Article-related errors

The first type of errors listed in Table 1 above relate to the use of articles. The total number of errors in article use was 45, with an average of 1.1 errors per essay. The
percentage of the total for this kind of error was 4.0 percent, and as the low figure suggests, this is something the students do not have big problems with. Some cases of article-related errors are presented in examples (1)-(3).

(1) A old man came and he bought Darkbrown Teddy and Lightblond Doll.
(2) It felt like an totally stupid plan.
(3) I want to buy a new dress and shoes.

Examples (1) and (2) illustrate errors where the students have done an a/an mix up. In example (3) the indefinite article is omitted despite the fact that in such a context, it is used in the same way in English and standard Swedish.

4.1.2 Lexis-related errors

The second category of errors is related to lexis. It comprises inappropriate, missing or redundant words. The total of lexis-related errors was 224, with an average of 5.3 errors per essay. Examples (4) and (5) are two sentences, the first with a missing word and the second with an (in context) inappropriate word.

(4) I was only 13 years _ when it all happened.
(5) They became good friends and she thought it was pretending.

In example (5) the only logical explanation for this choice of word seems to be that the student did not know the meaning of the word. The word she or he intended might be unbelievable or wonderful, which do not have any obvious connection with pretending.

4.1.3 Noun-related errors

The category of noun-related errors was divided into two groups, genitive and number. Two of these kinds of errors are presented in examples (6) and (7).

(6) Christopher friends didn’t like her at all.
(7) Her mothers was very glad when she came home.

The genitive is a form of the noun which typically shows a relationship of possession between one entity and another, and this grammatical feature is something Swedish children generally acquire at an early age. They also tend to early learn how to distinguish between singular and plural. Theoretically, example (7) could also be considered as a verb-form error under the condition that the girl in the story has two mothers. The percentage of noun-related errors in the students’ essays is 2.3 percent, and as the low number suggests this area is something the students in this investigation master well.

4.1.4 Preposition-related errors

The number of preposition errors committed by the students was 53, with an average of 1.3 errors per essay. This corresponds to 4.8 percent of the total number of errors. The preposition errors were divided into three groups: inappropriate preposition, missing preposition and redundant preposition. Examples (8) and (9) illustrate sentences with an inappropriate preposition and a missing preposition.

(8) She had brown long hair, which ended with her hips.
(9) Someone is knocking the door.

4.1.5 Spelling-related errors

As can be seen in Table 1, 43.9 percent of all errors were spelling errors, making this the most common error type in the student essays. The total amount of spelling errors was 490, with an average of 11.7 errors per essay. There was quite a bit of variation in this group, but several of the students misspelled the word said as sad. There were also several cases where I was spelled with a small letter and with became whit. Examples (12) and (13) feature other wrongly spelled words found in the students’ essays.

(12) They were both 16 years old and were living in the same city.
(13) Chris couldn’t desk rive how much he loved her.

4.1.6 Verb-related errors

As Table 1 indicates, verb-related errors were the second-most frequent type of error the students produced when writing their essays. The total number is 277, with an average of 6.6 errors per essay. Examples (14) and (15) are sentences where the students have used the wrong verb form.

(14) He was out and drive a car.
(15) He thought he were lucky.

Verb forms appear to cause problems for the students, including subject-verb concord as in example (15). A number of students also wrote *we was and *they is in several places.

4.2 Interference errors

When the students’ essays were analysed according to the categories introduced in section 2.4, 201 errors were considered to be the likely results of native language influence, i.e. interference. The students made, on average, 4.9 interference errors per essay. Compared with the total number of non-interference errors, the occurrence of interference errors is quite low. However, interference did occur, and as can be seen in Table 2, the students were mainly influenced by their native language in their use of prepositions. Table 2 also shows that the students were hardly influenced at all with respect to article, noun and adjective/adverb usage. In what follows I will provide a more detailed presentation of the cases of interference found in the students’ essays.
### Table 2: No. of interference errors in the student essays, classified according to category.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Preposition</th>
<th>Adjective/ adverb</th>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Nouns</th>
<th>Verb form</th>
<th>Clause</th>
<th>Lexis</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sum</strong></td>
<td>79</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>201</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average no. per essay</strong></td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.9</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Percentage of total no. of errors</strong></td>
<td>39.3</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>18.9</td>
<td>20.4</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 4.2.1 Prepositions

In *Learner English*, Swan & Smith (2001:33) propose that prepositions are a frequent source of errors for Swedish learners of English. Table 2 indicates that prepositions were a problem for the students in this investigation as well. Almost half of all interference errors were cases where the students used prepositions incorrectly due to influence of their mother tongue. The total number was 79, with an average of 1.9 errors per essay.

Swan & Smith (2001:33) also propose that Swedish speakers tend to use the preposition *in* when translating the Swedish equivalent *i* where English speakers would use another preposition than *in*. Examples (16) and (17) are cases of this kind.

(16) I go *in* High School.
(17) He was sad *in* two weeks.

Another common error found in this study seems to be due to the direct translation of the preposition *på* as *on* where English uses another preposition than *on*, as in examples (18) and (19).
(18) So you are not angry on me?
(19) She is on the hospital.

In addition, Swan & Smith (2001:33) mention that Swedish learners of English often produce errors such as *He convinced me of that he was innocent. In Swedish a preposition can be followed by an att-clause whereas preposition + that-clause (the equivalent of the Swedish att-clause) is normally not possible. Such errors were also found in this study, including the one presented in example (20).

(20) She thought about that she was going to move to her grandparents.

4.2.2 The distinction between adjective and adverb

According to Swan & Smith (2001:29), adverbs of manner tend to cause problems for Swedish speakers because of their similarity to adjectives. Another difficult area is what kind of word should follow verbs of perception such as feel, look, sound, smell and taste. In English, these verbs are normally followed by an adjective as complement. However, Swedes tend to use adverbs after these English verbs producing sentences such as *I feel terribly (Swan & Smith 2001:29). Yet Table 2 indicates that the students in this study did not produce many errors in this area. Only 5 adjective/adverb errors were found, yielding an average of 0.1 errors per essay. Some of these, including examples (21) and (22), actually involved the opposite of what was described above, i.e. an adjective where an adverb would have been required, which may nevertheless be due to the overlap of Swedish adjective and adverb forms:

(21) He didn’t go home direct.
(22) It was a very glamorous dress and she knows exact who her hair should look.

4.2.3 Article

According to Swan & Smith (2001:28) the use of the definite article is a common source of errors for Swedish learners of English. In English it is normal to use no definite article
(i.e. zero article) before uncountable singular nouns and countable plural nouns used in a general sense. Swedish, on the other hand, commonly uses the definite article in these cases. For example, *unemployment (arbetslöshet-en) has passed four per cent in Sweden.* This was not a frequent type of error in the essays I analysed. Table 2 indicates that the total number of errors found in the students’ essays is 3, with an average of 0.1 errors per essay. Examples (23) and (24) illustrate two of these cases. In example (23) the student has left out the definite article despite the fact that in this context it is required. This is probably a case where the student has been influenced by his or her native language since in Swedish the definite article is affixed to the end of the noun, for example *armé-n.* Example (24) illustrates a case where in the Swedish equivalent of this sentence the definite article is necessary.

(23) He going to _ army now.³
(24) I’m afraid of the death.

The low percentage suggests that either these students do not have difficulties knowing when to use the definite article before uncountable and countable plural nouns used in a general sense.

4.2.4 Nouns

In some areas the students produced very few errors that were due to their mother tongue. These include nouns. Only three noun-related errors were found in the essays, or 0.1 errors per essay. Swan & Smith (2001:27) point out that in some cases where English nouns are in the plural, Swedish uses singular forms and that this can cause problems for Swedish learners of English. In this investigation only one case of this kind of interference was found. It is presented in example (25) below. In example (26), native language influence is also quite obvious since the Swedish counterpart of *money* is plural.

(25) Only in my pyjama.

³ I have only emphasised the errors that are of immediate interest in the context: as can be seen, other types of errors may also occur in the example sentences provided.
He hopes his money are enough.\(^4\)

### 4.2.5 Verb form

In Swedish there is no inflection for person or number and consequently Swedish learners of English tend to drop the third person singular -s. This kind of error was found in 38 cases (18.9\%), with an average of 0.9 errors per essay. Examples (27) and (28) are cases of interference with respect to the agreement between subject and verb.

(27) William look at the clock and smiles.
(28) Arne Skoglund take on pistol and kill him.

In example (27) the student has used the correct form of the verb *smile*, but not of *look*. *William look* may thus be a simple blunder. Example (28) is more obviously a competence error since this student has dropped the third person singular -s in both verbs.

### 4.2.6 Clause-related errors

Cases where the students used the wrong word order, as in examples (29) and (30), were classified as clause-related errors. The examples represent cases where the students have been influenced by their mother tongue since they used Swedish word order rather than English. 20.4 percent of all errors were clause-related, which is the second-highest figure for interference in this study. The total number is 41, with an average of 1.0 per essay.

(29) When she came home was she very tired.
(30) The next day was Nick dead.

### 4.2.7 Lexis

Table 2 shows that 15.9 percent of the total number of interference errors are related to lexis. 32 cases were found in the essays, with an average of 0.8 errors per essay. Some of the words and phrases found, as in example (31), do not even exist in the English

\(^4\)It should be mentioned that example (26) can also be considered as a verb-form error.
language. A number of the words appear to have been chosen under the influence from the students’ native language, as in examples (32) and (33).

(31) She jumped out of the dusch.
(32) I want very good tires with pigs so it get better grip.
(33) And the arrow hit the whiting right in the head.

In example (31), it is easy to detect native language influence. This student has used the Swedish word dusch, which does not exist in English. The correct word in this context would be shower. In example (32) the student has translated the Swedish word piggar (‘spikes’) into pigs. The word pigs does exist in English but refers to farm animals. The word whiting in example (33) also exists in English, but is used to designate a type of fish. In this sentence the student probably meant a white person, which can be referred to as a viting in Swedish.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The aim of this investigation has been to find out if any patterns of native language interference occur in Swedish students’ written English. The method that was used for this study was to collect essays from students in grade eight at a secondary school, which provided a general picture of different kinds of interference problems in English language learning.

When correcting the essays I first decided to concentrate on the following areas: article-related, lexis-related, preposition-related, spelling-related and verb-related errors (see section 3.2). It should be noted that interference errors were not included in these categories, because I wanted to compare the total number of non-interference and interference errors. 1115 errors were considered to be non-interference errors, with an average of 26.6 errors per essay. The total number of errors would probably be higher if more categories of errors had been considered, but limitations of time restricted my analysis of errors to the most significant types.
Since this was a task of free writing, the students could also choose whether they wanted to write their essays by hand or on a computer. 42 essays were handed in and 18 of them were written by hand and the remaining 24 on a computer, with the help of a spell and grammar checker. The time the students spent writing their essays varied between 30 minutes and three to four hours. This was clearly reflected in the number of words in the essays, which ranges from 130 to approximately 3000. A small number of the students were hardly able to write a coherent text. This indicates that the students have reached different levels of proficiency. But overall they did not make many errors. The most frequent type of error in the students’ essays was spelling errors, with a percentage of 43.9 percent of non-interference errors. I have also noticed that many students were in a hurry and did not proofread their text before they handed it in to the teacher. I am convinced that if the students had proofread their essays they would have noticed many of their spelling errors. Furthermore, the results for the spelling errors would probably have been different if all essays had been written on a computer, since the students can then use a spell checker.

Verb-related errors were the second most common type of error committed by the students, representing 24.8 percent of the total. Common mistakes produced by the students concerned the concord between subject and verb as in *we was and *they is. In some areas the students produced very few errors. Only 26 errors related to nouns, or 0.6 errors per essay, were found. As mentioned in the method section (3.2), only the incorrect constructions that the students produced were counted. Consequently I can only assume that the categories with few errors are grammatical features the students master well. It should also be mentioned that the students were allowed to ask the teacher for help and use aids such as dictionaries. I am aware of the fact that this could have affected the results. However, I wanted to have a general picture of interference problems and the students were therefore allowed to write their essays in the classroom environment they are used to.

To obtain more comparable results, I should probably have let all the students write their essays by hand or on the computer. If the students had written the same amount of words
and spent the same time writing their essays would probably have facilitated the comparison of the essays.

The kinds of errors that were analysed as interference errors can be found in Swan & Smith (2001:26-35). As many researchers suggest it is difficult to determine the source of errors (see section 2.2). It is also very complicated to separate between non-interference and interference errors and, of course, it may be questioned whether the errors found in my investigation are due to interference. However, if the information provided in Learner English by Swan & Smith (2001) is accurate the total number of interference errors in this study is likely to be 201. Compared with the total number of non-interference errors, interference was relatively uncommon among the students in this investigation.

The results indicate that the incorrect use of prepositions was the most frequent type of error committed due to native language influence. Almost half of all interference errors were cases where the students used incorrect prepositions. This confirms what Swan and Smith propose about prepositions being difficult for learners of English. Furthermore, incorrect use of the preposition in supports Swan and Smith’s suggestion that the frequent occurrence of the equivalent i in Swedish results in the overuse of the English preposition in by Swedish speakers (2001:33). In addition, several students also used the preposition on, the equivalent of på in Swedish, where English uses another preposition than on.

Since there is no correspondence in Swedish to the third person singular –s, Swedes tend to drop this ending. 18.9 percent of all interference errors are related to the use or non-use of third person singular -s, making this the third-most common error type in the students’ essays.

It was very difficult to ascertain whether the students had made a simple mistake or simply do not master the rule. In a number of the students essays’ it was found that the students generally observed subject-verb concord but occasionally wrote an incorrect verb form.
Many of the error types were not very frequent, but they did actually occur at some point. For example, interference errors related to nouns and articles were identified only three times each. However, the mother tongue has some kind of influence on the learning of a second language, though it should be emphasised that the results of the present study should not be over-interpreted.

Finally, having completed this investigation, I can conclude that I have not only learnt a lot about both grammatical errors, but also that their causes are complicated. It has sometimes been very difficult to decide whether a particular error was caused by interference or by something else and there were several doubtful cases in all areas. Nevertheless, this study has hopefully provided some insights into the issues involved in the analysis of the language production by learners of English and in the identification of errors.
REFERENCES


