PRESENT CONTINUOUS OR SIMPLE PRESENT?:  
MOTHER TONGUE INFLUENCE IN EFL

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The influence of the mother tongue (L1) in the acquisition of second languages has been detected in various areas of language. One of these areas is tense-systems, on which the present study is based. This paper explains the results of an empirical study which was carried out with Spanish and Catalan speakers (20 subjects) who were acquiring English as a foreign language in Barcelona. The hypothesis is that, due to the different distribution of forms and meanings in English and Spanish and Catalan tense-systems, learners will tend to use the simple present instead of the present continuous when referring to present time (L1 negative influence). Both the qualitative and quantitative analysis of the data show that the hypothesis above is confirmed, especially in oral language. However, the form of the simple present that appears most frequently (without the -s in the third person singular, since the subjects’ level of proficiency in English is rather low) can also be interpreted as an infinitive. Since the infinitive may be used in the subjects’ L1s in such cases, L1 influence could then be positive.

The mother tongue (L1) has been widely accepted as one of the intervening factors, although not the only one, as some scholars in the 1960s claimed, in the acquisition of second languages. This influence is foremost in phonology, but it has also been detected in other areas of language (Odlin 1989, chs. 4-7). One of these areas is tense-systems (Bhardwaj 1988).

Accordingly, an empirical study was carried out in Barcelona to analyse the influence of the mother tongue on the acquisition and use of the English tense-system by Spanish and Catalan speakers. This
paper explains the findings in the use of one of the tenses under study, namely, the present continuous with present time reference. The hypothesis was that, due to the different distribution of tense forms and meanings in English and Spanish and Catalan (see table I below), this tense was likely to be replaced by the simple present in the interlanguage of those learners who used transfer\(^1\) as a learning strategy.

**TABLE I**

Present Time Reference: Tense Forms in English, Spanish and Catalan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time reference</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Spanish</th>
<th>Catalan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Habitual</td>
<td>Simple present</td>
<td><em>Presente</em></td>
<td><em>Presente</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>present</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td><em>Presente</em></td>
<td><em>Presente</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(now)</td>
<td>continuous</td>
<td><em>estar + gerundio</em></td>
<td><em>estar + gerundio</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The sample consists of 20 subjects from four different secondary schools in Barcelona who were in their first year. The study began at the end of October 1989, after one month of class, and finished in June 1990. It covered, therefore, a whole school year. The meetings with the researcher took place once a month and both written and oral data were obtained. The written data came from a test which contained four different kinds of exercises (gap-filling, using the correct tense, translation and composition). The oral data came from an informal conversation with the researcher which was recorded and later transcribed. This conversation included narration, description and answers to questions formulated by the researcher.

The data have been studied from a qualitative and a quantitative point of view. For the quantitative analysis the SPSS/PC+ (1988) has been used to corroborate the overall qualitative impression of the findings. The results are explained in what follows.

\(^1\) The term *transfer* is used in this paper with the current meaning of any kind of influence from the mother tongue, either positive or negative. It must not be related, then, to behaviourist theories.

*ATLANTIS XIV 1-2 (1992)*
I. Written Data

In the written production we can observe that most subjects distinguish between the meanings of the simple present and the present continuous tenses. The percentage of correct use is 75.3%, that is, the mother tongue has little negative influence in most items in the written test, but may have influenced them in a positive way, that is, leading to a correct structure. The simple present with habitual meaning appears in all the subjects. This correct use was to be expected, since both Spanish and Catalan also use the presente to refer to habitual actions.

The mother tongue has often been regarded as a source of errors in the acquisition of second languages. However, L1 can also be seen as a facilitating factor for those learners who use transfer as a strategy in the acquisition process. In this study, L1 may have helped those subjects who use the periphrasis estar + gerundio in Spanish and Catalan. The only problem that one may find with this perspective is that, as Ringbom states, there is a lack of “investigations of exactly how the L1 functions as an aid, not as an obstacle, to L2 learning” (1987, 48).

Nevertheless, there are some subjects who make no distinction at all between the simple present and the present continuous, as in:

S1, T2: I’m study. I’m estudy a little bit every day
S5, T1: I estudying, I studing every day

and other subjects who use the simple present instead of the present continuous as in:

S10, T1: We study now. We can’t go shopping
S20, T2: Now she dance
S4, T2 & S10, T4: We studys now. We can’t go shopping.

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2 $S$ stands for “student” and the number for the learner’s name. $T$ stands for “time sequence of the meeting” and the number corresponds to the order of the time sequence of the meeting (from 1 to 7).
The data above exemplify the possible negative influence of the mother tongue. The instances of negative influence only amount to 11.5% of the total but we must also bear in mind that 11.4% of the items were left without an answer. The examples above confirm the hypothesis about the influence, both negative and possibly positive, of Spanish or Catalan in the use of the English present continuous. As has been seen in Table I, both estar + gerundio and the presente are used in Spanish and Catalan to refer to those actions which English expresses by means of the present continuous. This finding also appears in Chamot (1978 and 1979), who found that the subjects in her study used the simple form instead of the present continuous because of the negative influence from L1 Spanish.

However, an important remark must be made in relation to this hypothesis. After the analysis of the written data, it is not clear whether the form that is used instead of the present continuous is a present form or, in fact, an unmarked form which carries the meaning that the learner wants to convey. The former would be a case of transfer from L1 (see above: “We studys now”); the unmarked form could also reflect mother tongue influence (see below, oral data).

Since this unmarked form coincides with the bare infinitive, the problem is to decide whether the form in question is in fact an infinitive or a present (see above: “Now she dance”). This problem mainly arises with the 3rd person singular when it is not marked with the -s of the present. In that case, there is no way of knowing whether the learner is using an infinitive form or a present. Perhaps learners want to show that they have understood the message and so the easiest means at their disposal is the use of the infinitive. Perhaps, on the contrary, learners are using their L1 knowledge and therefore, just as in L1, they use the present, with or without -s, since the -s has been reported as a difficult morpheme to acquire in English as a second language (Dulay et al. 1982). The same problem about the present or infinitive form has also been noticed by van Naerssen (1980) and by von Stutterheim (1984) and no conclusion has been reached yet.

When the written data are analysed sequentially, a slight
difference in the use of the present continuous can be appreciated between the first meetings and the last ones. The subjects rely on their L1 more at T1 and T2 (11.2% and 13.1%, respectively) than at T7 (7.5%). However, it is interesting to point out that at T5 and T6 the percentage of negative influence increases again as compared to T3 and T4 (15.7% and 15%, respectively). The reason for this change may lie in the fact that these meetings coincide with the practice of the simple present in class, which is introduced at a time which roughly coincides with T4 of the study. This may be the reason why the percentage at T4 (10.5%) is higher than at T3 (6.9%). Consequently, when the English simple present has been acquired by the students, they rely more on their L1 because a comparison between the time reference of both the English simple present and the present continuous is established with their equivalents in Spanish and Catalan. These results are represented in the diagram below.

**Diagram 1**
Longitudinal: Present Continuous
Written Data

![Diagram showing the percentage of influence over time]

**Time of the Meeting**

- No influence
- Negative influence

*Atlantis XIV 1-2 (1992)*
2. The Oral Data

The oral data present higher percentages of instances of negative influence than the written data (27.3%). It seems, therefore, that the subjects draw from L1 most in oral style. However, if the data at each meeting are compared, as has been done with the written data, one can also see that the percentage of transfer decreases throughout the school year. This means that instruction has a positive effect, since the low percentage of transfer in T7 as compared to T1 implies that this tense is finally acquired by subjects in their first year of secondary school. This result coincides with the findings in the written data. The written tests, however, show an increase in the percentage of negative influence when the simple present is introduced in class. This fact does not seem to affect the oral production, since the percentage of negative influence is not higher in the interviews which coincide with the presentation of the simple present in class. These results are represented in the following diagram:

**Diagram 2**
Longitudinal: Present Continuous
Oral Data

![Diagram showing percentages of negative influence and no influence over time.](image-url)
Another finding which may be worth mentioning for future studies appears in the analysis of the oral data. There has been a debate over the predictability of L1 influence in the acquisition of second languages (Ringbom 1987). The oral data in this study show that negative influence may be predicted in certain subjects, since their L1 production, which appeared spontaneously, consists in the use of the presente instead of the periphrasis estar + gerundio:

S6, T4: R: And tell me what the people are doing here, please  
S: ¿Qué hace la gente?  
S17, T3: R: What are you doing now?  
S: ... eh ... ¿qué hago ahora?  
S8, T3: R: And this woman?  
S: No sé lo que hace

If these subjects rely on their L1 to refer to the present moment, they will probably use the English simple present instead of the present continuous.

A similar case of mother tongue influence may be predicted when the subjects use an L1 infinitive as the answer to a question in English with a present continuous. When asked about the activity that a person was performing in a picture ("What is this man doing?"), one type of answer was the form of the infinitive ("Play the piano"). The mother tongue may have also intervened in such contexts, since the infinitive is allowed in these cases in both Spanish and Catalan:

A: ¿Qué está haciendo este hombre? / Què està fent aquest home?  
B: Tocar el piano / Tocar el piano

It is hypothesized that the use of the base form without the grammatical subject in the sentence may correspond to an infinitive and the use with the grammatical subject may be a simple present tense with or without -s in the 3rd person singular. However, further research taking into account the learners’ explicit comments on the issue would be needed to validate this hypothesis.
To conclude, this study has analysed the role that the L1 may play in the acquisition and use of the English present continuous in a foreign language learning situation. The hypothesis stated at the beginning of the paper has been confirmed by the data. It has been seen that, especially in oral language, some of the subjects’ production shows the use of the simple present tense instead of the present continuous. This has been explained as a case of negative influence from L1. However, we have also seen that this form may be an infinitive and not a present tense, which would imply positive influence from L1.

Some of the findings presented here permit further analysis, and other approaches to the data could be pursued. This paper can be taken as a small contribution to the study of second-language acquisition.

WORKS CITED


