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# The acquisition of English by young Italian learners: A corpus study on the influence of transfer

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## Abstract

This thesis aims to investigate the role of Italian in the acquisition of English, and asks the following research question: Is there evidence of transfer errors from L1 Italian to L3 English in the writings of children collected in the LEONIDE corpus? The focus is on the usage of articles, modal verbs, and lexical verbs. The annotated texts included in this learner corpus are analysed with the use of the ANNIS corpus tool. Mistakes are counted and evaluated based on the differences between English and Italian (e.g., Maiden & Robustelli, 2007; Proudfoot & Cardo, 2013; Herring, 2016) and on the results of previous research (e.g., Duguid, 2001; Ionin et al., 2008; Rocca, 2007). The mistakes are compared to those made by slightly younger L1 learners of English with the help of the Lancaster Corpus of Children's Project Writing (LCCPW).

This thesis concludes that some of the errors made by the participants can be traced back to influences from L1 Italian. Such mistakes include the overuse of the definite article *the*, the overuse of the modal verb *must*, and the use of the verb *make* where native speakers might use the verbs *do* or *have*. However, other mistakes such as the omission of the third person *-s* morpheme are not necessarily due to transfer from Italian; rather, these are common errors for all learners of English. The absence of certain modal verbs and do-support, furthermore, can be explained by the fact that the participants are beginning learners. The comparison with L1 learners did not yield many insights, as these participants made very few mistakes. Further research could focus on a comparison between the Italian participants and even younger L1 learners to find out which mistakes are caused by transfer and which mistakes are common for all learners of English. In addition, a comparison with learners from other language backgrounds could clarify the difference between generic language learning mistakes and transfer errors.

*Keywords:* second language acquisition, Italian, English, transfer, corpus linguistics

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## Introduction

In a globalised society, mastering more than one language can be of importance. Knowledge of English in particular is becoming more and more essential since it is the main lingua franca all over the world (Jenkins, 2010). In countries where English is not the dominant language, children are often taught it in school. This type of education is commonly referred to as English as a Foreign Language (EFL), and the process of learning to master English requires many hours of instruction.

It is commonly agreed upon that many factors can influence the language learning process. One of those factors is how similar or different the first language (L1) is to the new language. While some aspects of a second language (L2) might be easily acquired because they function similarly or identically to those in the L1, other aspects might be difficult to acquire, either because they function completely differently in the L1 or because they do not exist in the L1. Both learners and teachers can benefit from awareness of differences and similarities between the L1 and English as the L2. This awareness can shed light on the aspects of language learning that might need more attention.

The present study focuses on the acquisition of English at school by Italian-speaking children. While much research has already been conducted regarding the acquisition of English phonetics by both Italian adults and children (e.g., Flege et al., 1995; Munro et al., 1996), many aspects that are important in written language such as the acquisition of morphology and syntax have not been studied extensively. In order to discover more about this topic, the present study will use the LEONIDE corpus (Glaznieks et al., 2020). This corpus includes written texts by Italian children between the ages of 11 and 14 who are learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in school. The focus of the study will be on the acquisition of articles as well as modal and lexical verbs.

Chapter 1 will provide a theoretical background on language acquisition and transfer. Chapter 2 consists of a contrastive analysis between Italian and English with a focus on articles and verbs. The methodology of the present study will be described in Chapter 3, and more information about the LEONIDE corpus will be provided. The results will be presented in Chapter 4 and further discussed in Chapter 5. This chapter will also include implications for language teaching and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

### 1.1. Language acquisition and transfer

In the field of foreign language acquisition, transfer from previously learned languages is a widely researched phenomenon. Traditionally, transfer is described as “the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired” (Odlin, 1989, as cited in Odlin, 2022, p. 7). The concept of transfer can be used to explain the errors that learners make in the target language, as well as to predict which elements of the target language might be learned easily and which elements will be more difficult to acquire (Gass, 1979).

Often, a distinction is made between positive transfer, sometimes referred to as *facilitation*, and negative transfer, sometimes referred to as *interference* (Gass & Selinker, 2008). These terms refer to the output that is produced by the learner and can be used to explain whether the transfer results in a correct or incorrect production (Gass & Selinker, 2008). While positive transfer can lead to acceleration of the learning process, negative transfer can delay the process, leading learners to spend more time at a certain stage of development (Benson, 2002).

### 1.2. L3 acquisition

In addition to L2 acquisition, the acquisition of a third language has become a widely researched phenomenon as well. Third language acquisition “refers to the acquisition of a non-native language by learners who have previously acquired or are acquiring two other languages” (Cenoz, 2003, p. 71). L3 acquisition differs from L2 acquisition in that cross-linguistic transfer is possible from two and not just one previously acquired language. Which language a learner relies on when learning a L3 is influenced by factors such as language distance (also sometimes referred to as *typological proximity*), metalinguistic awareness, and proficiency in the L1 compared with the L2 (García-Mayo, 2012).

García-Mayo (2012) argues that there are currently three models or hypotheses that explain the processes of transfer into the L3. Flynn et al. (2004) developed the Cumulative Enhancement Model (CEM), which claims that since language acquisition is accumulative, “the prior language(s) can be neutral or enhance subsequent language acquisition and the L1 does not play a privileged role in the process” (García-Mayo, 2012, p. 137). This means that transfer of linguistic knowledge will only occur when it has a positive effect.

Rothman (2011) created the Typological Primacy Model (TPM), which claims that transfer can come from either the L1 or the L2, but that the process of transfer will be constrained by typological proximity between the three languages. When the L2 is typologically closer to the L3 than the L1 is, transfer from the L2 is more likely. Experiments that study the acquisition of a second European language by speakers with a non-European language as their L1 provide evidence for this model. Linguistic as well as cultural factors might play a role in the similarities between the L2 and L3 (Hammarberg, 2001).

Bardel and Falk (2007) argue for a model in which the L2 acts as a filter, which makes the L1 inaccessible during L3 acquisition. Even though the L1 (Dutch or Swedish) and L3 (Swedish or Dutch) in their study are typologically proximal, the learners did not show L1 transfer, but rather L2 transfer during the acquisition of negation (i.e., transfer from either German, Dutch or English). Therefore, Bardel and Falk claim that typological proximity favours L2 and not L1 transfer. They do note, however, that there is no evidence against L1 transfer “in the case of true L2 acquisition” (p. 480).

Even though these three models seem to claim that L2 transfer is more likely when acquiring a L3, previous studies have pointed to both L1 and L2 as the source of transfer (see Foote, 2009). However, based on previous research, Foote suggests that the L1 and L2 can be the source of transfer of form, while meaning seems only to be transferred from the L1.



### 1.3. Contrastive analysis

In order to understand the differences between two languages, a contrastive analysis can be conducted. The concept of a contrastive analysis was first created by Fries (1945), who argued that efficient teaching materials include a comparison to the L1 of the learner. Lado further developed Fries' ideas, arguing that such an analysis makes it possible to “predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student” (Lado, 1957, as cited in Wardhaugh, 1970, p. 125).

The term “Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis” (CAH) was coined by Wardhaugh (1970). Although some SLA researchers criticise the idea of a contrastive analysis, Odlin (2022) argues that “[c]rosslinguistic comparisons are indispensable in doing transfer research” (p. 31).

## Chapter 2: Contrastive analysis

In this chapter, a contrastive analysis will be made between Italian and English in the areas of articles and verbs in order to highlight the differences between the two languages. This can indicate where interference might occur and what mistakes Italian learners of English might make based on their L1. This information will help to understand the results of the present study, and it will help to answer the research question that will be asked: *Is there evidence of transfer errors from L1 Italian to L3 English in the writings of children collected in the LEONIDE corpus?* This question will be answered with the help of the following three sub-questions:

1. Is there evidence of transfer errors in the usage of definite and indefinite articles?
2. Is there evidence of transfer errors in the usage of modal verbs?
3. Is there evidence of transfer errors in the usage of lexical verbs?

First, the grammar of articles, modal verbs and lexical verbs in both languages will be set out. Then, previous research into the acquisition of these aspects will be discussed. After, expected areas of transfer will be formulated, which will function as the hypotheses for the present study.

### 2.1. Contrastive analysis: articles in Italian and English

#### 2.1.1. Italian articles

Italian has both indefinite and definite articles, and they are inflected for gender and number. As will become clear from the tables below, the noun that follows determines which article is used. The articles are always placed before the nouns.

**Table 1**

*Definite articles in Italian. Source: Maiden & Robustelli (2007, p. 61)*

	<b>When?</b>	<b>Singular</b>	<b>Plural</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Masculine</b>	Before a consonant	il	i	il libro – i libri
	Before <i>s</i> + consonant, <i>z</i> , <i>ps</i> , <i>gn</i> , <i>y</i>	lo	gli	lo specchio – gli specchi lo zaino – gli zaini
	Before vowel or <i>h</i>	l’	gli	l’uomo – gli uomini
<b>Feminine</b>	Before a consonant	la	le	la pizza – le pizze
	Before a vowel or <i>h</i>	l’	le	l’arancia – le arance

**Table 2**

*Indefinite articles in Italian. Source: Maiden & Robustelli (2007, p. 61)*

	<b>When?</b>	<b>Form</b>	<b>Example</b>
<b>Masculine</b>	Before a consonant	un	un libro
	Before <i>s</i> + consonant, <i>z</i> , <i>ps</i> , <i>gn</i> , <i>y</i>	uno	uno specchio uno zaino
	Before vowel or <i>h</i>	un	un uomo
<b>Feminine</b>	Before a consonant	una	una pizza
	Before a vowel or <i>h</i>	un’	un’arancia

These rules do not always apply when the articles precede loanwords. When a loan noun starts with *h*, and that letter is pronounced by Italians, the articles *lo* and *uno* or *la* and *una* are often used. Masculine loanwords that start with *x-*, *ch-*, *pt-*, *ct-*, *pn-* or *ft-* are also preceded by *lo* and *uno*.

The indefinite article *un* and all its variations can be used before count nouns. Before mass nouns, however, the so-called “partitive article” is used. This is a combination of the preposition *di* + definite article and indicates “an unspecified quantity or part of the whole denoted by a noun” (Maiden & Robustelli, 2007, p. 79). Examples are:

(1) Vorrei **del** pane.

*I’d like some bread.*

(2) C’è ancora **della** speranza.

*There is still some hope.*

Proudfoot & Cardo, 2013, p. 12

It is also possible to use the partitive article before a plural noun. However, this is more common in the northern dialects of Italian, as in (3) below. In southern regions, it is preferred not to use an article before a plural noun, as in (4).

(3) Ci sono **delle** mosche dentro la bottiglia.

(4) Ci sono mosche dentro la bottiglia.

*There are (some) flies in the bottle.*

Maiden & Robustelli, 2007, p. 76

### 2.1.2. English articles

English only has one definite article (*the*; example 5) and one indefinite article with two variations (*a* or *an*). These articles are always placed directly before the noun, as in Italian.

The indefinite article *an* is used before a noun that starts with a vowel sound (example 7).

When the following noun starts with a consonant, *a* is used (example 6). The indefinite article cannot appear before a plural noun. However, *some* and *any*, which can render a noun indefinite, can appear before plural nouns (example 8).

(5) John is going to **the** museum.

(6) John is **a** teacher.

(7) Mary is **an** engineer.

(8) **Some** teachers are going to the museum.

### 2.1.3. Usage of English and Italian articles

Duguid (2001) argues that article use causes one of the greatest problems for Italian learners of English. She states that in particular the contrast between specific and generic use of articles might lead to issues. In Italian, a definite article is much more often required than in English (Maiden & Robustelli, 2007). In Italian, nouns “which refer generically to ‘wholes’ or ‘entities’ – whether the whole is a mass, a substance or an abstract concept, or the universal class of some set of entities – are preceded by the definite article” (Maiden & Robustelli, 2007, p. 64). This is generally not the case in English. Furthermore, in Italian, a definite article is generally used after the adjective “tutto” (in either four of its forms) which means “all” (see example 10).

(9) **Il** vino fa male alla salute.

*Wine is bad for your health.*

(10) Tutta **la** vita è preziosa.

*All life is precious.*

Maiden & Robustelli, 2007, p. 64-66

Moreover, Italian often uses a definite article where English would use an indefinite one in cases where the noun is a normal or expected attribute of people and their daily lives (Maiden & Robustelli, 2007). English also often allows for a possessive pronoun.

(11) Ha **la** febbre.

*He has a fever.*

(12) Hai **la** macchina?

*Do you have a car?*

(13) Maria si dipinge **le** unghie.

*Maria paints her nails.*

Maiden & Robustelli, 2007, p. 64-66

There are a few other common cases in which a definite article is generally used in Italian but not English, such as before the names of countries, before a combination of a professional title and name, and before the names of languages (Maiden & Robustelli, 2007).

Moreover, Duguid (2001) argues that indefinite articles are often omitted after the Italian equivalents of words such as, *with* and *without*, as well as in phrases that refer to locations. She expects errors such as:

(14)\* I am speaking to you as friend.

(15)\* You can eat it with spoon.

(16)\* She lives in mountains.

Duguid, 2001, p. 84

It is important to mention that in Italian, the possessive pronoun is, in most cases, preceded by an article. Therefore, learners might make mistakes such as the following:

(17) I crying because I **wanting** the my mummy.

Rocca, 2007, p. 133

#### 2.1.4. Previous research regarding article acquisition

In the past two decades, several experiments have been performed to learn more about the second language acquisition of English articles by children from different language backgrounds. These experiments have shown that child L2 learners display similarities to L1 learners in three respects: (1) learners acquire *the* before *a(n)*, (2) learners display a “higher

accuracy with *the* than with *a*", and (3) learners display substitution errors of *the* in indefinite contexts (Zdorenko & Paradis, 2011, p. 55).

In their study, Zdorenko and Paradis (2011) found evidence of L1 transfer in learning definite articles. Children with Spanish or Arabic as their L1, both languages with article systems, only rarely omitted the definite article: the rate of omission was around 6%. Children with Chinese, Hindi, Urdu, or Punjabi as their L1, languages without articles, omitted *the* more frequently: the rate of omission was around 35%. Moreover, in the Chinese, Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi groups, "there was no significant difference between the rate of *the* omission in definite contexts and *the* substitution in indefinite contexts" (p. 55). In contrast, the participants with Spanish and Arabic as their L1 omitted *the* significantly fewer times than that they substituted *the* for *a* in indefinite contexts. This means that choosing the correct article in indefinite contexts was problematic for all children.

In an earlier study, Zdorenko and Paradis (2008) also found evidence of L1 transfer in English L2 acquisition of articles. They summarise their findings in terms of three tendencies. They discovered that regardless of L1 background, all children substituted the definite article *the* for indefinite *a* in indefinite specific contexts. Moreover, all children "were more accurate with use of *the* in definite contexts than with *a* in indefinite contexts" (p. 227). However, children with an L1 that does not have an article system omitted articles significantly more than children whose L1 has an article system.

Ionin et al. (2008) investigated the article use of L1 Spanish speakers. They discovered that adults as well as children can transfer the L1 article semantics into L2 English. Since English and Spanish both divide articles on the basis of definiteness (*the* vs. *a*), the L1 transfer led the participants to behave in a native-like manner. Ionin et al. (2008) furthermore argue that speakers with an L1 that does not have an article system, such as Russian, are not

able to transfer article semantics. Rather, they rely on access to Universal Grammar (UG) and the input that they receive.

Based on the differences between Italian and English and on the results of previous research, it is expected that the definite article will be overused, both in cases where English would not use an article and where English would use an indefinite article.

## 2.2. Contrastive analysis: verbs in Italian and English

In the following section, the use of Italian and English verbs will be explained. First, general information about verbs, mood, tense, and aspect will be given. Next, modal verbs will be discussed.

### 2.2.1. Italian verbs

Italian verbs are inflected for person (first, second or third) and number (singular or plural).

The infinitive of Italian verbs can take one of three endings:

1. The first conjugation ends in *-are*, such as in *parlare*;
2. The second conjugation ends in *-ere*, such as in *credere*;
3. The third conjugation ends in *-ire*, such as in *dormire* or *finire*.

In order to create the correct form of the verb, *-are*, *-ere* or *-ire* is removed from the stem, and the appropriate inflection is added (see the table below). Verbs in the third conjugation follow two patterns. For the first group of verbs, *-ire* is removed from the stem, and the inflection is added. Verbs such as *finire* require the infix *-isc-* in four out of six person forms. This last pattern is the most common.

**Table 3**

*Italian regular verbal inflections in the present tense*

	<b>1<sup>st</sup> conjugation parlare</b>	<b>2<sup>nd</sup> conjugation credere</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> conjugation dormire</b>	<b>3<sup>rd</sup> conjugation finire</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> p. sing.	<b>parlo</b>	<b>credo</b>	<b>dormo</b>	<b>finisco</b>
2 <sup>nd</sup> p. sing.	<b>parli</b>	<b>credi</b>	<b>dormi</b>	<b>finisci</b>
3 <sup>rd</sup> p. sing.	<b>parla</b>	<b>crede</b>	<b>dorme</b>	<b>finisce</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> p. pl.	<b>parliamo</b>	<b>crediamo</b>	<b>dormiamo</b>	<b>finiamo</b>
2 <sup>nd</sup> p. pl.	<b>parlate</b>	<b>credete</b>	<b>dormite</b>	<b>finite</b>
3 <sup>rd</sup> p. pl.	<b>parlano</b>	<b>credono</b>	<b>dormono</b>	<b>finiscono</b>

Irregular verbs such as *essere* (“to be”) and *avere* (“to have”) do not follow the patterns described above, and instead their stem changes when inflected. These verbs are often used as auxiliary verbs. They form compound tenses together with past participles.

The past participle is formed by the addition to the verb stem of *-ato* in the first conjugation, *-uto* in the second conjugation, or *-ito* in the third conjugation, and is always preceded by an auxiliary (Proudfoot & Cardo, 2013). Irregular forms also occur in the past participle. A few rare verbs, such as *discernere* (“discern”), *concernere* (“concern”, “regard”) and *mescere* (“pour”), lack a past participle (Maiden & Robustelli, 2007).

The past participle can combine with auxiliaries in different tenses to form various compound tenses, namely the present perfect, pluperfect, past anterior, future perfect, past conditional, perfect subjunctive, pluperfect subjunctive, perfective infinitive, and perfective gerund (Maiden & Robustelli, 2007).

Present participles also exist in Italian. However, these are not commonly used in modern spoken language, but rather appear in formal or bureaucratic language (Proudfoot & Cardo, 2013). The present participle is formed by the addition of *-ante* (singular) or *-anti* (plural) to the verb stem of the first conjugation, and *-ente* (singular) or *-enti* (plural) is added to the stem of the second and third conjugations (Proudfoot & Cardo, 2013).

To indicate an action in progress, English often uses the present continuous tense. In Italian, the verb *stare* followed by a gerund is used<sup>1</sup>. The gerund for verbs in the first conjugation is formed by the addition of *-ando* to the verb stem, while *-endo* is used for the second and third conjugations. The past gerund is formed by an auxiliary followed by a past participle. Examples are:

(18) **Sto preparando** il caffè.

*I'm making coffee.*

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of this Italian construction, the term “gerund” does not refer to “a word derived from a verb base which functions as or like a noun” as it would traditionally (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002, p. 80). However, this term is used in Italian reference grammars (Maiden & Robustelli, 2007; Proudfoot & Cardo, 2013) and therefore it is adopted here as well.



(19) Non ho risposto al telefono perché **stavo facendo** la doccia.

*I didn't answer the phone because I was having a shower.*

Proudfoot & Cardo, 2013, p. 53

### 2.2.2. English verbs

English verbs are inflected for person (first, second and third) and number (singular or plural). They are furthermore inflected for tense, aspect, and mood (as well as voice). The infinitive of English verbs is a combination of *to* + base form of a verb (Herring, 2016). Bare infinitives lack *to*, and occur after modal or auxiliary verbs (Herring, 2016).

In order to form compound tenses, auxiliary verbs can be combined with participles. The present participle is formed by the addition of *-ing* to a bare infinitive. The past participle is formed by the addition of *-ed* or, in some cases, *-d* to a bare infinitive. The past participle of irregular verbs can have many different forms, for example *been*, *given* and *sat* (Herring, 2016). When a participle is preceded by an auxiliary, the following tenses can be formed:

(20) *present continuous*: I **am** walking

(21) *present perfect*: I **have** walked

(22) *present perfect continuous*: I **have** been walking

(23) *past continuous*: I **was** walking

(24) *past perfect*: I **had** walked

(25) *past perfect continuous*: I **had** been walking

The future is sometimes regarded as a compound tense as well. This tense is formed by the combination of the modal verb *will* and the bare infinitive (Nordquist, 2018). The phrase *be going to* followed by a verb can also be used to form a future sentence (Herring, 2016).

#### 2.2.2.1. Previous research regarding verb acquisition

Several studies have investigated the acquisition of tense morphology. Firstly, it is generally argued that in both L1 and child L2 English language learning, the progressive morpheme *-ing* is acquired early on, while the third person singular *-s* morpheme and the regular past tense *-ed* morpheme are acquired relatively late (Paradis, 2010; Chondrogianni & Marinis,

2012). Jia and Fuse (2007) showed that Mandarin-speaking learners of English between the ages of 5 and 16 had mastered the progressive morpheme *-ing* after five years of living in the United States. There was progress in the acquisition of third person singular *-s*, but the learning plateau had not yet been reached. Past tense *-ed* was not mastered by any of the participants. Paradis (2005) suggests that there is no relation to L1 transfer, since children who have Spanish or Mandarin as their L1 also display this pattern of acquisition. However, Paradis also argues that children might pay more attention to morphemes when their L1 is inflectionally rich (e.g., Spanish) than when it is not (e.g., Mandarin).

Rocca (2007) studied the use of progressives by three Italian child learners of English at beginner's level. These children were 7 and 8 years old. They used bare progressives, which means that no auxiliary preceded the progressive. In the beginning, the progressive was mostly used with activity verbs (e.g., *play*, *walk* and *laugh*). However, after approximately three months of learning, the children started using the progressive of stative verbs as well. This was a remarkable finding, since Rocca argues that state progressives are marked for native speakers of English. The children formed sentences such as:

(26) because my daddy **wanting** a book of Oxford.

(27) I crying because I **wanting** the my mummy.

Rocca, 2007, p. 133

Other stative progressives included *knowing*, *seeming* and *needing*.

#### 2.2.2.2. *Expected areas of transfer for Italian learners*

In the light of the differences discussed above, there are a few problems that Italian learners are likely to encounter when it comes to the acquisition of English verbs.

Firstly, the third person singular *-s* in the present tense might be omitted. It is uncommon for Italian words to end in *-s*, and hence it is difficult for Italian learners to pronounce a word-final *-s*. Duguid (2001) argues that due to subvocalization learners might not use it in writing either. Moreover, as described above, the *-s* morpheme is generally acquired relatively late.

Secondly, the word *to* before infinitives might be omitted because there is no equivalent in Italian (Duguid, 2001).

Thirdly, since progressive verbs are used less frequently in Italian than in English, learners might tend to use the present simple rather than the present continuous (e.g., “What do you read?” instead of “What are you reading?”, Duguid, 2001). It is also possible that present participles are used without an auxiliary preceding them (Rocca, 2007).

### 2.2.3. Modal verbs

Italian has three modal verbs: *dovere* (“to have to”), *potere* (“to be able to”) and *volere* (“to wish to”) which are generally used before an infinitive (Proudfoot & Cardo, 2013). In contrast, English has nine modal verbs: *will*, *would*, *shall*, *should*, *can*, *could*, *may*, *might* and *must* (Herring, 2016). Maiden and Robustelli (2007) provide a list of Italian equivalents to the English modal verbs.

The English structure of modal verbs *will* and *would* + verb largely corresponds to the Italian future and conditional verb forms. The use of *would* with the meaning of “used to” can be expressed in Italian by using the imperfect tense of the verb or the addition of the verb *solere* in the imperfect form.

The formal usage of the English modal verbs *shall* and *should* also correspond to Italian future and conditional verb forms. An example of such formal usage is “We shall arrive tomorrow” (p. 337). However, it is also possible to use the Italian modal verb *dovere* (“to have to”), e.g. “Shall I clear the table?” can be translated to Italian “Devo sparcchiare?” (p. 337). The modal verb *must* is the equivalent of Italian *dovere*.

For English modal verbs *can* and *could* as well as *may* and *might*, Italian uses the modal verb *potere*. To express the meaning “It is possible that...”, Italian uses “Può darsi che” + a subjunctive verb form. Furthermore, it is important to note that the negative “may not”

can have two meanings in English: “is not able” or “is not permitted”. For the latter meaning, Italian uses *dovere* instead of *potere*.

### 2.2.3.1 Previous research regarding acquisition of modal verbs

Research into the acquisition of modal verbs has often been conducted in light of the acquisition of pragmatics in the L2. An example of such a study is Salsbury and Bardovi-Harlig (2000), who studied the development of modality in eight ESL learners in the United States. They found that “[d]espite considerable variability in learners’ modality profiles, modal expressions emerged in a consistent acquisitional pattern” (Kasper, 2001, p. 506):

maybe – think – can – will – would – could

It was found that learners started using *maybe* and *think* after the first month of learning, quickly followed by *can* and *will*; only after six months, did they start to produce *would* and *could* (Salsbury & Bardovi-Harlig, 2000, as cited in Xiao, 2015).

Evidence of L1 transfer in English modal verb acquisition was found by McDouall (2012). He found that Korean learners tended to overuse modal verbs, which he explains might be because in their L1, “indicating modality is obligatory, while in English modality is predicated on pragmatic factors” (p. 43).

More evidence for modal verb overuse by L2 learners of English was found by Xiao (2017), who shows that in both speaking and writing, Chinese learners use *must*, *should*, *will* and *can* more frequently than native speakers. The author claims that this overuse is likely due to the fact that modal verbs may have different meanings in different languages. For example, in English, *should* “entails a sense of duty or responsibility”, while its Chinese counterpart “can also convey a sense of advice” (Xiao, 2017, p. 169). The errors are therefore attributed to L1 transfer. The Chinese learners underused the modal verbs *would*, *might*, and *could* in comparison to native speakers.

In Aijmer's (2002) corpus study, it was also found that, compared to native speakers, Swedish learners of English have the tendency to overuse modal verbs, in particular *will*, *might*, *should*, *must* and *might*. Moreover, these learners use constructions of modal verb followed by an adverbial such as *can perhaps* and *probably should*. This is likely an effect of L1 interference, because unlike in English, in Swedish, "the epistemic modal meaning is more often realised as an adverb or as an adverb plus a modal verb" (p. 72). These combinations were not used by native speakers.

One reason for the overuse of modal verbs is the difference between written and spoken language. Aijmer (2002) argues that non-native learners of English adopt a more speech-like writing style in comparison to native speakers, whose style tends to be more formal. This, in addition to the fact that modal verbs are more frequent in spoken than in written English, might lead to an overuse of modal verbs by learners compared to native speakers.

According to some researchers such as Hinkel (1995, 2009), it is also possible that the overuse or underuse of certain modal verbs is due to cultural or religious differences. She argues, for example, that the language uses and socio-cultural frameworks of speakers of Chinese, Japanese and Korean are remnants of Confucianism. Important elements are the "hierarchical view of social and kinship roles, responsibilities, and obligations" (Hinkel, 2009, p. 678). In Hinkel's study, participants tended to overuse modals of obligation and necessity when writing about subjects including parental roles and academic accomplishments. These modals included *must*, *should* and *have to*.

#### *2.2.3.2 Expected areas of transfer for Italian learners*

To conclude, it is expected that the subjects in the present study will not use all the English modal verbs, since they are beginning learners. However, they might overuse some modal verbs in comparison to native speakers, as was found in multiple previous studies.

In addition to the possible L1 transfer described in the previous section, it is also likely that transfer from Italian specifically will occur. Learners might not use *will* and *would* or *shall* and *should* since the future and conditional are expressed by different verb forms in Italian and not by the use of modal verbs. Furthermore, since Italian has one modal verb to express the meanings of *can*, *could*, *may* and *might*, and *can* is generally acquired first, *can* might be overused. Moreover, Italian learners might overuse the modal verb *must* “since in Italian different tense forms of *dovere* are used to shade meaning, rather than different modals” (Duguid, 2001, p. 81).

## Chapter 3: Methodology

In order to answer the abovementioned research questions, a corpus analysis was performed. After an in-depth search for a freely accessible L2 learner corpus of English containing written texts by L1 Italian speakers, the LEONIDE corpus was chosen (Glaznieks et al., 2020). LEONIDE is an abbreviation of *Longitudinal Learner Corpus in Italiano, Deutsch and English*. This learner corpus is trilingual and is divided into three sub-corpora, consisting of texts written in German, Italian or English. In this thesis, the focus will be on the data in the English sub-corpus.

### 3.1. Data selection: Participants

The LEONIDE corpus consists of texts written by 163 participants from the Italian province of South Tyrol with varying linguistic backgrounds. Depending on where the participants live in the province, their everyday language is German, Italian or Ladin, or a combination. Several participants speak other languages at home. For more information about the linguistic situation in South Tyrol, see Glaznieks et al. (2022).

The participants attend schools in which either German or Italian is the language of instruction. In schools where German is the language of instruction, Italian is taught as a second language, and vice versa. The goal of the present study was to select participants with Italian as their L1, who speak no other L1 at home, and who attend a school where Italian is the language of instruction. In these schools, German and English are taught from the first grade onward. There are 43 pupils in the corpus who meet these requirements. Seven of these pupils have special educational needs, including learning difficulties such as dyslexia and mental or physical impairments. They were excluded from this analysis. Two further participants were eliminated because the corpus contained no text written by them in English but only in Italian and/or German. This means that the remaining group of participants

consists of 34 pupils. Out of these participants, 17 are male and 17 are female. In the first year of data collection, the participants were between 11 and 14 years old.

### 3.2. Data selection: Materials

The texts in the corpus are essays written during the three years of lower secondary school. The data were gathered between 2015 and 2018 in eight school classes. Each year, the participants were asked to write a narrative and an argumentative text. Picture stories were used as prompts for the narrative writing task, and the input was different for each year of participation. The task in the first year consisted of six pictures. Participants were asked to describe the events in these pictures (see Appendix 1).

The argumentative essays required participants to write about their ideas on simple topics. Introductory texts were included to assist them with writing their own texts. For example, the English opinion text in the second year concerned the use of free time and the instructions included a sample of answers to the question “How should students spend their free time after school?” (see Appendix 2). The opinion text involved the same topic in the first and third year of participation in order to “discern differences in individual development with respect to the same topic” (Glaznieks et al., 2022, p. 104).

### 3.3. Corpus Interface

The corpus was accessed via the ANNIS interface, “an open source, cross platform (...), web browser-based search and visualization architecture for complex multi-layer corpora” (Corpus Tools, n.d.). This interface includes a query builder, which allows users to search for annotations and word forms. Search results can be viewed in the interface itself, but they can also be exported. Furthermore, it is possible to filter the participants by adding the relevant metadata in the query builder, as shown in Table 4.

It is also possible to download the complete texts via the repository of the Eurac Research CLARIN Centre (Glaznieks et al., 2020).



**Table 4***Overview of author metadata used in the LEONIDE corpus*

<b>Author metadata</b>	<b>Filters used in the present analysis</b>
Author age at production	
Author complete DE <sup>2</sup>	
Author complete EN <sup>3</sup>	
Author complete IT <sup>4</sup>	
Author complete opinion <sup>5</sup>	
Author complete picture <sup>6</sup>	
Author complete texts <sup>7</sup>	
Author gender	
Author ID	
Author L1	Italian
Author multiple L1	False
Author participation year 1	
Author participation year 2	
Author participation year 3	
Author special needs	No special needs
Author years in project	
Corpus	LEONIDE_EN
Document	
School class ID	
School grade level	
School language	Italian
Task ID	
Task type	
Task year	
Text ID	
Text language	English
Time of data collection	

### 3.4. Data Analysis

The LEONIDE corpus is annotated in the ANNIS interface, which made it possible to search for word forms and annotations. These annotations include both automatic and manual tagging. The automatic annotations consist of part-of-speech and lemma tagging, while the

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<sup>2</sup> “Complete” indicates whether or not the author has written German texts in all three years of data collection.

<sup>3</sup> “Complete” indicates whether or not the author has written English texts in all three years of data collection.

<sup>4</sup> “Complete” indicates whether or not the author has written Italian texts in all three years of data collection.

<sup>5</sup> “Complete” indicates whether or not the author has written opinion texts in all three years of data collection.

<sup>6</sup> “Complete” indicates whether or not the author has written picture texts in all three years of data collection.

<sup>7</sup> “Complete” refers to the entire repertoire of the author, i.e. whether or not the author has written texts in (1) all three languages and/or (2) in all three years of data collection and/or (3) for both of the two types of tasks. Since most profiles are not complete, these categories were not used for the present study.

manual annotations consist of tags indicating for example orthographic errors, foreign words, and the usage of emoticons and images.

In order to gather the relevant data, several queries were used to find occurrences of modal verbs, lexical verbs, and definite and indefinite articles. It is possible to search for target words instead of original spellings in the ANNIS interface, and this feature was used to ensure that misspelled words were also included in the search.

#### 3.4.1. Articles

The first aim of this study is to identify potential mistakes with the use of articles. In order to do this, a frequency analysis was performed, which generated a wordlist. This list, including all words and their number of uses, was exported from the ANNIS interface. The ten most commonly used nouns were selected. Then, a search was performed for each of the ten nouns and the results in context, showing which article (if any) preceded the noun, were exported. These results were then analysed to identify the mistakes. A confusion matrix (see for example Zeng, 2020) was created to present an overview of the types of errors that participants make.

#### 3.4.2. Modal verbs

The nine main modal verbs of English are *will*, *shall*, *would*, *should*, *can*, *could*, *may*, *might* and *must* (Herring, 2016). A frequency analysis was performed to discover which modal verbs were used most commonly and whether there were modal verbs that were not used by the participants. All of these verbs can occur in (contracted) negative forms as well, e.g. *can't* and *wouldn't*, which were included in the search.

#### 3.4.3. Lexical verbs

In order to find the most common lexical verbs, the same wordlist as mentioned above was used. This wordlist included the lexical verbs in all forms and tenses, and all instances were added together. The five most frequent lexical verbs were selected, and a search was

performed for each of these verbs. The results were exported from the ANNIS interface. These results were then analysed to discover the errors that participants make when using these verbs. There was a focus on the omission of “to” as well as the use or non-use of participles.

### 3.5. Comparison with monolingual English learners

The mistakes that Italian learners are observed to make might be due to transfer from their L1. However, it is also possible that the participants are simply in the process of acquiring a language. In order to discover whether the mistakes that the Italian learners make are also common mistakes for L1 learners of English, a comparison was made using the Lancaster Corpus of Children’s Project Writing (henceforth LCCPW; Ivanic & McEnery, 1996).

This corpus was chosen because it is freely and easily accessible. It includes texts written by English children between 9 and 12 years old, slightly younger than the Italian participants. The children attended a primary school in the North West of England. No further information about the participants is available, and therefore their linguistic backgrounds and potential learning impairments are unknown.

In total, 10 texts were chosen: five from year 4, two from year 5 and three from year 6. These texts have varying subjects, as the children were allowed to write about a topic they chose in year 4 and 6. The texts from year 5 are about animals. The texts were chosen based on the number of words. It was evident that many children adopted texts directly from sources such as informative books and websites. These texts included facts and sentences that were arguably not written by the children themselves. Therefore, these projects were not used in the present study, and instead there was a focus on choosing projects that included mostly self-written texts.

A few parts of the texts were excluded from the analysis, namely contents or index, bibliography, acknowledgements, and texts in or describing tables and figures, and lists of names or titles.

The frequency analyses needed for the comparison were done by means of the corpus analysis software AntConc (Anthony, 2023). A wordlist was generated to select the ten most common nouns and the five most common verbs. This made it possible to analyse the usage of articles and identify possible mistakes with the verbs. This wordlist was also used to discover which modal verbs were used most frequently and which modal verbs were not used at all by the L1 learners.

## Chapter 4: Results

In this section, the results from the data analysis will be presented. First, articles will be discussed, followed by modal verbs and finally lexical verbs. Example sentences will be provided. The example sentences from the LEONIDE corpus will be accompanied by a tag including the Author ID (e.g., 57Y25A10) and the year of data selection in which the text was written (Y1 for year 1, Y2 for year 2 and Y3 for year 3).

### 4.1. Articles

A wordlist sorted by frequency was obtained from the LEONIDE texts to select the ten most commonly used nouns. These are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Most common nouns in the LEONIDE corpus*

<b>Nouns</b>	<b>Number of occurrences</b>
school	72
time	67
subjects	64
bus	59
history	59
maths/mathematics	53
lesson	51
homework	51
woman	49
English	46

A concordance was generated to discover which article errors occurred with these nouns. It was found that participants used definite *the*, indefinite *a(n)*, no article, and possessive pronouns before these nouns. In 36 out of the total 570 analysed cases, quantifiers such as *many*, *much* and *a lot of* were used; these instances will not be discussed here. A confusion matrix was made to create an overview of the types of errors that participants made. It can be seen in Table 6 that in most cases, correct article choices are made: these are found along the diagonal from top left to bottom right.

**Table 6**

*Confusion matrix: article usage with the ten most common nouns in the LEONIDE corpus*

Used form	Target form				Total
	Definite <i>the</i>	Indefinite <i>a(n)</i>	No article	Possessive pronoun	
Definite <i>the</i>	95		17	2	114
Indefinite <i>a(n)</i>	8	68	3		79
No article	2	6	261		269
Possessive pronoun	2	1		69	72
<b>Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>75</b>	<b>281</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>534</b>

#### 4.1.1. Explanation of errors

In this section, the errors that participants made will be further explained, and examples will be given. In order to create an overview, the nouns are grouped together semantically.

##### 4.1.1.1. School subjects

School subjects such as *history*, *maths* or *mathematics* and *English* are often mentioned in the opinion texts. In general, no articles are placed before these subjects. However, before the latter, four incorrect instances of an article were found:

- (28) Then I think that **the** English is the important language... 57Y25A10 – Y3  
 (29) ...you use **the** English 57Y25A10 – Y3  
 (30) ...these subjects in particular **a** Deutsch and **a** Englisch. 57Y25A15 – Y3

##### 4.1.1.2. Other school-related nouns

Other common nouns in the opinion texts were *school*, *subjects* and *lesson*. In many cases, no article is used before *school*. The participants often produced correct constructions such as “My favourite subjects at school are...” and “After school, I...”. However, there are also many examples where a definite article is used in contexts where native speakers might not use one:

- (31) I after **the** school sometimes go in the city with my friends. 57Y25A07 – Y2  
 (32) For example: **a** students isn’t good in **the** school... 57Y25A09 – Y2  
 (33) For me **the** school is in the 2<sup>nd</sup> place. 57Y26A10 – Y2  
 (34) When **the** school finish, I in the free time doing... 57Y27A12 – Y2

The noun *lesson* is often used to describe what makes a lesson interesting to the participants.

The indefinite article is most commonly used. Very few mistakes were found with this noun, but a few are:

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| (35) In lesson, for me, are interesting the subjects... | 57Y25A10 – Y1 |
| (36) I love lesson when we see film...                  | 57Y28A15 – Y3 |
| (37) An example I like Sports lesson because...         | 57Y25A06 – Y1 |

It is important to mention that it is also possible that the plural *lessons* was meant to be used in (36) and (37).

#### 4.1.1.3. Homework and free time

In the opinion texts, participants wrote about the time they spend on their homework and the activities they do in their free time. When writing about homework, articles are often quite correctly not used.

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| (38) I spend 1/2 hours for homework                     | 57Y27A06 – Y2 |
| (39) I spend not much time to do homework and learning. | 57Y25A09 – Y2 |

The possessive pronouns *my* and *their* are also used, as well as the definite article.

Before the noun *time* there is often no article. The definite article *the* is used 10 out of 67 times, often correctly. However, in a few cases, a possessive pronoun is arguably a better fit:

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| (40) When the school finish, I in <b>the</b> free time doing              | 57Y27A12 – Y2 |
| (41) I spend a lot of <b>the</b> free time with my friends or my parents. | 57Y28A15 – Y2 |

#### 4.1.1.4. Picture task nouns

Two common nouns used in the picture task are *woman* and *bus*. Before *woman*, both definite and indefinite articles are frequently used. There are three instances where no article was used, but where an indefinite article is needed:

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| (42) ...she is woman that run                               | 57Y28A15 – Y3 |
| (43) ...for Iranian woman it's a wrong thing                | 67Y28A16 – Y3 |
| (44) ...it's not good that Iranian woman can't do things... | 67Y28A16 – Y3 |

It is important to mention that it is possible that the noun in (36) and (37) was intended to be plural, and that it might not be an article error.

Before the noun *bus* participants generally use a definite article. However, there are ten instances where the indefinite article was used. While the sentences are not grammatically incorrect, native speakers might have the tendency to use a definite article.

- |  |               |
|--|---------------|
| (45) She cannot run near to a bus !!                 | 57Y25A06 – Y3 |
| (46) A girl run to takes a bus but an group see her. | 57Y27A06 – Y3 |
| (47) A woman runs after a bus                        | 57Y28A13 – Y3 |

#### 4.1.2. Comparison to L1 corpus

In order to understand whether the mistakes made by the Italian participants are the result of transfer, a brief comparison to the LCCPW corpus will be made. The most common nouns in this corpus can be found in Table 3.

**Table 7**

*Most common nouns in the LCCPW corpus*

Nouns	Number of occurrences
fish	38
water	30
people	21
butterfly	19
dinosaurs	17
dog	17
time	16
puppy	15
years	15
salmon	14

In contrast to the LEONIDE corpus, article errors were only found before two out of ten nouns, namely *dinosaurs* and *butterfly*. The indefinite article *a* was found twice before the plural noun *dinosaurs*:

- (48) Although no one has ever seen **a dinosaurs** we know a lot about them from fossils.  
 (49) Fossils are the bones of **a dinosaurs** such as its teeth.



More mistakes were made with the noun *butterfly*. The singular noun was often used after words such as *other*, *all* and *a few*:

(50) ...and other butterfly like small tortoiseshells

(51) all butterfly are plant eaters

(52) A few butterfly are pests to humans

Project: *Butterflies*, KH5.1

It is important to mention that this project about butterflies contains many mistakes throughout. For this reason and because very few errors were made by other participants, these mistakes might not be representative of article errors that L1 learners generally make.

#### 4.2. Modal verbs

Out of the nine main modals of English (*will*, *shall*, *would*, *should*, *can*, *could*, *may*, *might* and *must*), the LEONIDE participants use six. The modals *shall*, *may* and *might* are never used.

In the Year 1 texts, a total of 14 modal verb tokens were used, mostly in the opinion texts. Three out of nine modal verbs were used: *can* (as well as *can't*), *will* and *must*.

In the Year 2 texts, a total of 34 modal verb tokens were used, again mostly in the opinion texts. The modal *can* was used most frequently, also in the contracted negative form *can't*. In the opinion texts, the modal verb *should* was used 11 times.

Interestingly, in Year 3, the number of modal verbs was higher in the narrative texts than in the opinion texts. As in previous years, the modal verb *can* was used most often (35), followed by *must* (20). The other modal verbs that were used were *will*, *could*, *should* and *would*. The verbs *can*, *must* and *will* were also used in their contracted negative forms.

**Table 8***Use of modal verbs by L2 learners*

<b>Modal</b>	<b>Use year 1</b>	<b>Use year 2</b>	<b>Use year 3</b>	<b>Total</b>
<i>Will</i>	2	2	9	<b>13</b>
<i>Shall</i>	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
<i>Would</i>	0	0	1	<b>1</b>
<i>Should</i>	0	11	3	<b>14</b>
<i>Can</i>	11	17	35	<b>63</b>
<i>Could</i>	0	0	4	<b>4</b>
<i>May</i>	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
<i>Might</i>	0	0	0	<b>0</b>
<i>Must</i>	1	4	20	<b>25</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>120</b>

In order to determine whether L1 learners of English show similar patterns, a comparison analysis was made of the LCCPW corpus. The results are shown in Table 9. It was found that these L1 learners also use the modal *can* most often, including the negated form. Other commonly used modals were *could*, *will* and *would*. In contrast to the Italian participants, the modal verbs *must* and *should* were not used often. However, the L1 English subjects did use both *may* and *might*. The modal *shall* was not used.

**Table 9***Use of modal verbs by L1 learners*

<b>Modal</b>	<b>Number of occurrences</b>
<i>Will</i>	14
<i>Shall</i>	0
<i>Would</i>	1
<i>Should</i>	3
<i>Can</i>	33
<i>Could</i>	14
<i>May</i>	13
<i>Might</i>	6
<i>Must</i>	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>84</b>

### 4.3. Lexical verbs

The frequency analysis of lexical verbs showed that the five most commonly used types are *like*, *go*, *run*, *see* and *make*. The focus is solely on the use of the verbs, which means other mistakes in the sentence (such as incorrect word order) are not discussed here.

An additional search for the lemmas of the verbs showed that some occurrences were not tagged as verbs. For example, a search for the lemma “like” generated a total of 205 results. Of these results, the lemma was labelled as a verb 168 times. The other 37 instances were tagged as an interjection or preposition. However, this was only correct 8 times. The other 29 instances were in fact verbs.

Similarly, two instances of *go* were incorrectly tagged as nouns. Three instances of *run* were labelled as nouns, twice incorrectly so. The third instance was ambiguous and therefore it was excluded from the analysis. One instance of *make* was incorrectly labelled as a noun.

**Table 10**

*Most common lexical verbs in the LEONIDE sample*

<b>Verb</b>	<b>Occurrences according to frequency analysis</b>	<b>Occurrences counted here</b>	<b>Mistakes counted</b>	<b>% mistakes out of all occurrences</b>
<i>like</i>	168	197	23	11,7%
<i>go</i>	157	159	55	34,6%
<i>run</i>	81	83	30	36,1%
<i>see</i>	60	60	26	43,3%
<i>make</i>	58	59	36	61%

As can be seen in Table 10, the highest proportion of mistakes was made with the verb *make*.

Table 11 summarises the mistakes that were made. The mistakes will be explained further below, and examples will be given. Since several instances of these lexical verbs included two errors, the total number of mistakes in Table 11 is slightly higher than in Table 10.

**Table 11**

Overview of mistakes with lexical verbs in the LEONIDE sample

Mistake	Like	Go	Run	See	Make	Total
Incorrect or missing do-support	5	3	1			10
Missing “to” or participle	17	5	4	1	1	28
Incorrect use of participle	1	4	2			7
Incorrect use of “to”		2				2
Missing -s morpheme in 3 <sup>rd</sup> p. sing.		32	18	15	8	72
Overuse of -s morpheme		2			2	4
Missing modal or other auxiliary verb		6	5			11
Incorrect choice of verb		1		4	22	27
Tense errors				6	4	10
<b>Total</b>	23	55	30	26	37	172

#### 4.3.1. Incorrect or missing do-support

The participants made mistakes in using do-support in negative sentences. In most cases, do-support was missing (examples 53 and 54). Example (55) shows an instance where *don't* was used in addition to a modal verb. Do-support is ungrammatical here, since the negation should have been added to the modal verb *can*.

- (53) I not like so much geography 57Y25A06 – Y1  
 (54) The dad goes not in the kitchen. 57Y26A14 – Y2  
 (55) She don't can run. 57Y27A23 – Y3

#### 4.3.2. Missing “to” or participle

The participants often wrote grammatically incorrect sentences where two verbs followed each other. In most cases, the sentences can be rendered grammatical by adding “to” between the verbs or by changing the second verb into a present participle (with *-ing* ending). In some cases, only one of the two options is possible.

- (56) I like play video games. 57Y27A08 – Y1  
 (57) Because I like spend my free time with my friend 67Y29A16 – Y2  
 (58) I like learn in groups. 57Y26A19 – Y3  
 (59) I like be creative 67Y28A16 – Y3  
 (60) I don't like study geography 57Y28A12 – Y1  
 (61) I'm run to take the bus to go at home 57Y27A16 – Y3

(62) Two police ask me: “Why you run?” <sup>8</sup>	77Y26A04 – Y3
(63) I like make experiment	57Y26A06 – Y3
(64) Mattia is go to call the father	57Y25A07 – Y1
(65) Jessica is going go to the bus	57Y27A02 – Y3

#### 4.3.3. Incorrect use of participle

In total, five instances were found where a participle was used after “to”.

(66) She stop to running	57Y26A10 – Y3
(67) Jacob enter in the home and go to eating	57Y25A09 – Y1
(68) I like to drawing	57Y27A05 – Y3

In two cases, the participle was incorrectly placed after a modal verb.

(69) She can’t running in a public place.	57Y26A14 – Y3
(70) She must running to hold the bus.	57Y26A10 – Y3

#### 4.3.4. Incorrect use of “to”

Two instances were found in which the marker “to” was used unnecessarily. In both examples, it is possible to leave “to” out or otherwise to use “go and call”.

(71) Can you go to call Federico?	57Y28A06 – Y1
(72) Can you go to call he?	57Y28A06 – Y1

#### 4.3.5. Missing -s morpheme

The error that was made most frequently was the lack of the -s morpheme on third person singular verbs. Examples of this error are:

(73) The man go to his son, Mattia.	57Y25A07 – Y1
(74) She run in the street after the bus.	57Y28A12 – Y3
(75) Veronica see a man in the dark.	57Y27A08 – Y2
(76) The teacher make the lessons interesting ar boring.	57Y27A16 – Y3

This mistake was not made with the verb *like*, since this verb was never used in the third person singular, but almost solely in the first person singular.

#### 4.3.6. Overuse of -s morpheme

The -s morpheme was overused a few times as well.

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<sup>8</sup> This mistake was counted twice: under the category *missing “to” or participle* and under the category *missing modal or other auxiliary verb*.

(77) 2 girls goes in the forest	57Y26A10 – Y2
(78) Carla and Lucy goes to the camping	57Y27A06 – Y2
(79) But later she decide to makes it	57Y25A06 – Y3
(80) They makes the lessons interesting.	57Y27A16 – Y1

#### 4.3.7. Missing modal or other auxiliary verb

There are several instances in which the participants did not use an auxiliary or modal verb where it would have been necessary. Sometimes the auxiliary or modal was forgotten before a participle:

(81) The two brothers going in the forest.	57Y25A09 – Y2
(82) Father going out to look	57Y27A16 – Y1
(83) They ask why she running	57Y26A20 – Y3

A modal verb to form the future was forgotten in some cases as well:

(84) Federico answer: “Yes, I go”.	57Y28A06 – Y1
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In other cases, the auxiliary was not used in questions:

(85) Two police ask me: “why you run?”	77Y26A04 – Y3
(86) And they say he: “why run you?”	57Y27A05 – Y3

#### 4.3.8. Incorrect choice of verb

One participant incorrectly chose the verb *go*:

(87) I don’t like maths, because I don’t go so much good in this subject.	57Y25A07 – Y1
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Participants often used *see* where native speakers might use *watch*. Moreover, there was one instance where a participant likely meant to use *saying* rather than *seeing* (example 90).

(88) I love see historical film and documentary <sup>9</sup>	57Y27A12 – Y3
(89) I love lesson when we see film in English or German in class.	57Y28A15 – Y3
(90) The cat was walking around seeing “meow”	67Y25A18 – Y2

The verb *make* was used often in contexts where it was not needed; see examples (91) and

(92). In these two cases, it is also possible to add *go* instead of *make* (“I go travelling” and “I

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<sup>9</sup> This is an example where two mistakes were made with one lexical verb. This instance of *see* was counted as an “incorrect choice of verb” as well as “missing *to* or participle”.

go dancing”). *Make* was also used in contexts where native speakers might use verbs such as *do* or *have* (examples 93, 94, 95).

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| (91) When I make a travel know other language is important.         | 57Y25A06 – Y1 |
| (92) I make dancing 2 times at the week                             | 57Y27A05 – Y2 |
| (93) I like science because we make a lot of experiments            | 57Y26A05 – Y3 |
| (94) I love when we make work in groups                             | 57Y26A10 – Y3 |
| (95) Elisabeth and George make a walk in the wood near their house. | 57Y28A13 – Y2 |

#### 4.3.9. Tense errors

When using the verbs *see* and *make*, participants made mistakes in choosing the correct tense.

They used *see* instead of *seen* and *make* instead of *made*. One participant used *madek* instead of *made*.

- |   |               |
|---|---------------|
| (96) He had see a dead child.                                   | 57Y26A19 – Y2 |
| (97) We have also saw how our eyes work.                        | 57Y26A05 – Y3 |
| (98) A lesson interesting madek the teacher.                    | 57Y26A10 – Y3 |
| (99) She stop them and said “you two have make me lost my bus”. | 67Y25A18 – Y3 |

#### 4.3.10. Comparison to L1 corpus

In order to understand whether the mistakes made by the Italian participants are the result of transfer, a comparison analysis of the LCCPW corpus was made. Table 12 shows the five most common verbs used by the L1 children.

**Table 12**

*Five most common verbs in the LCCPW corpus*

Lexical verb	Frequency	Other forms included
get	28	gets; getting; got
like	23	liked
see	20	seeing; seen; saw
eat	19	eats; eating; eaten; ate
go	16	goes; going; gone

There were no mistakes found in the use of these five lexical verbs. Participants often use “to” to form the infinitive, or these verbs are used after an auxiliary or modal verb. As can be seen from the table above, the verbs are used in various forms and tenses. No tense mistakes were found either with these verbs.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

In this chapter, the results will be further discussed and analysed. The limitations of this study will be discussed, and recommendations for teachers will be given.

### 5.1. Articles

The first sub-question that was asked in this thesis was: Is there evidence of transfer errors in the usage of definite and indefinite articles? Based on the differences between Italian and English and on the results from previous research, it was predicted that the Italian participants would overuse the definite article, both in cases where English would not use an article and where English would use an indefinite article.

Overall, the participants did not make many mistakes in their article usage. Out of the 534 analysed instances, 41 errors were found. The results indeed showed that the most common article error was the use of the definite article where English would use no article. In some cases, there is evidence of an influence from Italian, for example in the construction *the English*. This is because Italian places a definite article before the names of languages (Maiden & Robustelli, 2007). In other cases, it is not clear whether the error is due to L1 influence or whether it is an error that all child L2 learners of English, or even L1 learners of English, tend to make. An example is the use of the definite article before the noun *school*, where adult native speakers might not use an article. Since previous research such as the studies by Zdorenko and Paradis (2008; 2011) and Ionin et al. (2008) do not focus on null article contexts, it is not possible to decide whether or not the overuse of definite articles in these contexts is a common mistake for (child) L2 learners of English. Nonetheless, it is known that Italian learners of English tend to make this mistake, as described in Chapter 2.

Another mistake is the use of the definite article where English might use a possessive pronoun. This is also a concept that has not been discussed in the previous research on article errors. However, it is known that in Italian, definite articles commonly precede nouns that



express a normal or expected attribute of people's lives (Maiden and Robustelli, 2007; see section 2.1.3). This can explain the overuse of the definite article by L2 learners.

A striking mistake was made with the noun *bus*: seven participants used the indefinite article where a definite article would be a better fit. This was unexpected and cannot be explained by means of previous research.

The analysis of the writings from the LCCPW corpus showed that child L1 speakers of English who are slightly younger make very few article mistakes. The mistakes that were found were only made by two participants. Therefore, it is argued here that the article errors made by the Italian participants are not common for all learners of English.

To answer the first sub-question, there is evidence of transfer errors from Italian. Further research could focus on the overuse of definite articles in null article contexts. In addition, the overuse of the indefinite article could be examined.

## 5.2. Modal verbs

The second sub-question that was asked in this thesis was: Is there evidence of transfer errors in the usage of modal verbs? Based on the differences between Italian and English and on the results from previous research, it was predicted that the subjects in the study would not use all English modal verbs, since they are beginning learners. However, some modal verbs might be overused compared to native speakers, as was found in several previous studies.

L1 transfer was anticipated as well: *will*, *would*, *shall* and *should* were predicted to be used infrequently, since these do not have equivalents in Italian. Rather, their meanings are expressed by the use of different verb forms. Moreover, *can* as well as *must* were expected to be used frequently.

The results showed that the participants indeed do not use all English modal verbs: six out of nine occurred. The number of modal verb types that participants used increased in each year of data collection. *Can* is used most often throughout the years. As predicted, *must* was

overused in comparison to the L1 learners from the LCCPW corpus. This could indicate L1 transfer. This modal verb could be a direct translation of *dovere*, and in Italian “different tense forms of *dovere* are used to shade meaning, rather than different modals” (Duguid, 2001, p. 81). Furthermore, the participants might not yet be familiar with the construction “to have to”, which the L1 learners used a total of 13 times. The construction was found four times in the LEONIDE corpus, but it was only used by one participant.

Contrary to the abovementioned prediction, *should* was used frequently in Year 2. However, this might be due, to the influence of the question the participants were answering in their opinion texts: “How **should** students spend their free time after school?” (Glaznieks et al., 2022; see Appendix 2).

Overall, it seems that the participants improved in their use of modals during the three years of lower-secondary school. While in the first year, only three out of nine modals were used (*can*, *will* and *must*), a fourth one was added in the second year (*should*), and a fifth and sixth were added in the third year (*could* and *would*). These additions, as well as the increasing use of *will*, indicate that the participants are learning to express future and conditional constructions in English with the use of modal verbs.

There is also development in the negation of modal verbs. In the first and second year, only *can* is found with the negator *n't* or *not*, while in the third year *must* and *will* are also found in their negated forms (*mustn't* and *won't*).

The absence of modal verbs *shall*, *may* and *might* does not necessarily point to L1 transfer. Previous research indicates that these modal verbs are not acquired early on by L2 learners. Moreover, *shall* was also not used by the L1 learners in the LCCPW corpus. This might be due to the fact that this modal verb is considered formal and polite (Herring, 2016), and therefore the learners might never have encountered it. The modal verbs *may* and *might* are used by the L1 learners but not by the Italian learners. It can not be concluded whether this

is due to the fact that these modal verbs are acquired later on in the language learning process, or because L1 transfer has an influence.

### 5.3. Lexical verbs

The third and final sub-question that was asked in this thesis was: Is there evidence of transfer errors in the usage of lexical verbs? Based on the differences between Italian and English and on the results from previous research, it was predicted that the subjects in the study would omit the third person singular *-s* morpheme as well as the word *to* before infinitives. While the *-ing* morpheme is acquired early on in English language learning, influence from Italian might lead to the infrequent use of progressive verbs. Bare progressives were expected as well, based on the outcomes of Rocca's (2007) study described in section 2.2.2.

#### 5.3.1. Third person *-s* morpheme

The results show that the most common error is the omission of the *-s* morpheme. Lightbown and Spada (2013) describe this error as "simplification" and explain that L1 learners of English also make this mistake. Their data furthermore show that this mistake is made by L2 learners regardless of their L1 background. Both the French-speaking and the Chinese-speaking participants in their study omit the *-s* morpheme, while French but not Chinese employs grammatical morphemes on verbs to indicate person and number. Therefore, this phenomenon is seen as a developmental error, and no evidence of transfer from Italian is observed.

The *-s* morpheme was overgeneralized several times as well, i.e. it was used in a context where it did not belong. Such overgeneralization is commonly seen as a reflection of the learners' "understanding of the second language system itself rather than an attempt to transfer characteristics of their first language" (Lightbown & Spada, 2013, p. 44). Again, no evidence of transfer from Italian is observed.

### 5.3.2. Do-support

Another common error was the omission or incorrect use of do-support. This construction is specific to English, and therefore L2 learners from all language backgrounds, including Italian, need to acquire it through input (Zdorenko, 2011). Since the participants are beginning learners, they might not have had enough input yet to correctly understand and acquire this construction.

### 5.3.3. Errors with “to” or participle

Many times, participants produced constructions such as “I like be creative”. To render these constructions grammatical, either “to” could be added, or the second verb could be changed into a present participle. Italian might have an influence here. The infinitive participle “to” does not have an equivalent in Italian and therefore, learners often omit it before infinitives (Duguid, 2001). Moreover, since progressive verbs are used less frequently in Italian (Duguid, 2001; Rocca, 2007), the participants might not have acquired present participles yet.

The morpheme *-ing* was overused seven times: it was used twice after a modal verb (“can’t running”) and five times after the word “to” (“I like to drawing”). These mistakes might be cases of overgeneralization. They indicate that participants are acquiring this morpheme, but they might not yet know when (not) to use it.

The use of “to” in a place where it does not belong can also point to overgeneralization. The participant who made this mistake twice might have overgeneralized the rule of placing “to” before an infinitive. Alternatively, the participant might have misunderstood the phrase “go **and** call” and changed it to “go **to** call”.

### 5.3.4. Missing modal or other auxiliary verb

There are several instances in which the participants did not use an auxiliary or modal verb where one was required. Sometimes the auxiliary or modal was forgotten before a participle

(e.g., “The two brothers going in the forest”), meaning that the participants used a bare participle as in Rocca’s (2007) study.

In other cases, a modal verb needed to form the future was forgotten. This can be due to the fact that these modal verbs were not acquired yet, or it can point to L1 transfer since Italian does not have equivalents of these modal verbs and forms the future by other means.

An auxiliary verb was sometimes omitted in questions. Again, this might be due to influence from Italian. In Italian, interrogative sentences have the same word order as declarative sentences. Only the intonation and use of a question mark indicate that the sentence is a question. Auxiliaries or *dummy do* are not needed to form a correct sentence as they are in English. Therefore, learners produced sentences such as “Why you run?”.

#### 5.3.5. Incorrect choice of verb

The verbs *see* and especially *make* were sometimes chosen where a native speaker would choose a different verb. The verb *see* was used instead of *watch*, indicating that the students have not yet acquired the semantic difference between these two verbs.

The verb *make* was commonly used where native speakers might use verbs such as *do* or *have*. It is likely that L1 transfer has an influence here. The overuse of *make* could be due to the literal translation of the Italian *fare*, a very versatile verb (San Filippo, 2019). Some example constructions and their literal translations are:

- (100)      Make a travel – *fare un viaggio*
- (101)      Make sport – *fare sport*
- (102)      Make a walk – *fare una passeggiata*

San Filippo, 2019

The participants need to learn that in English, *do* or *have* are used in these contexts and that idioms from Italian cannot always be literally translated.

#### 5.3.6. Tense errors

Tense errors were made with the verbs *make* and *see*. The examples indicate that the participants experience difficulty with the construction auxiliary + past participle of a lexical

verb (e.g., *have make* and *had see*). Moreover, the regular past participle morpheme *-ed* is overgeneralized to irregular verbs (e.g., *maked* instead of *made*). No L1 transfer from Italian is detected with these errors, which are also common among L1 learners.

#### 5.3.7. Comparison with L1 learners

A comparison with the LCCPW shows that L1 learners of a slightly younger age are further developed in their lexical verb acquisition. However, even younger L1 learners might make similar mistakes as the Italian participants. Further research could incorporate a comparison with such younger learners to find out which mistakes are not common for all learners, but rather specific to (Italian) L2 learners.

### 5.4. Limitations

In this section, the limitations of the present study will be discussed.

#### 5.4.1. Annotations in ANNIS

The first limitation of the present study lies with the annotations of the texts in the ANNIS corpus interface. A thorough investigation of the query results highlighted mistakes with the annotations made by the researchers. For example, there were instances where the word “like” was tagged as an interjection while the context showed that it was a verb. When using the ANNIS interface, it is important to be aware of these errors, and it is recommended that different search terms are used to obtain a more complete overview of the element that is being researched.

#### 5.4.2. Interpretation of texts

The second limitation is that the writings of the children are at times difficult to interpret. While the context can help most of the time, some texts include so many mistakes that it is impossible to determine what is meant. For example, it was occasionally challenging to decide whether or not the chosen article was correct or whether the lexical verb was being

used correctly in context. Moreover, Italian words were used at times. Some examples of such ambiguous sentences are:

(103)	he homework and learn for at least 2 hours	57Y27A02 – Y2
(104)	she understand that is one woman that run back a Bus luser	57Y28A15 – Y3
(105)	You don't (devi) run ....	57Y25A10 – Y3
(106)	I do you not like these subjects *ar is noioso	57Y26A06 – Y1

#### 5.4.3. Third language acquisition

The participants in the present study are argued to be third language acquirers of English (Glaznieks et al., 2022). While they speak only Italian at home and attend a school where Italian is the language of instruction, German is taught and likely spoken in their environment. Even though previous research has indicated that the L1 as well as the L2 can have an effect on L3 acquisition (see section 1.2), it was beyond the scope of this study to investigate the influence of German on the English language learning process in the students represented in the LEONIDE corpus. Future research could investigate this issue.

#### 5.4.4. L1 control group and topics

For the present study, the LCCPW corpus was used to function as a L1 control group. However, this corpus includes texts with completely different topics than the texts in the LEONIDE corpus. This had an impact on the comparison made between these corpora. Moreover, little was known about the participants in the LCCPW corpus, which made it impossible to exclude bilingual children or children who had language or learning impairments. This might have also impacted the comparison.

### 5.5. Recommendations for teaching

A general recommendation for teachers is to take their students' L1 into account when teaching a new language. Being aware of the differences between the two (or more) languages can help to anticipate mistakes and have a better understanding of which elements of the new language might be challenging for the learners.

Beside the general recommendation to take the possibility of L1 transfer errors into consideration, there are more specific recommendations that can be given for the teaching of articles, modal verbs, and lexical verbs. These will be discussed now.

#### 5.5.1. Articles

Master (1995) argues that while it is almost impossible for non-native speakers of English to avoid producing article errors completely, article accuracy improves with increasing proficiency. Therefore, he recommends that teachers pay attention to the article system. Moreover, it is recommended that teachers focus on null article contexts. The results of the present study underline the importance of this, since many mistakes involve the production of an article where none is expected.

Other studies such as those by Shin and Kim (2017) show positive effects of consciousness-raising activities. During such activities, “a linguistic form is isolated and explicitly presented to students to raise their awareness of that particular form and help them realize its occurrence and features in discourse” (AlHassan & Wood, 2015, p. 54). Examples of such activities used by Shin and Kim (2017) are matching tasks and the rewriting of sentences with given words. Moreover, they focused on core expressions to “help learners understand how particular articles (...) functioned in discourse” (p. 83). Lastly, Shin and Kim (2017) argue that working on learner examples and correcting each other’s mistakes can ensure that errors are noticed and remembered. Exposure to rich input can also assist in article acquisition.

#### 5.5.2. Modal verbs

Tyler et al. (2010) argue that English language teaching textbooks often lack precise explanations of both the meaning and uses of modal verbs. Aijmer (2002) affirms this idea and moreover argues that the use of modal verbs in textbooks “differs from their use in



authentic English” (p. 60). One such example is that the Italian participants use *must*, while the L1 learners use *have to*.

It seems as if textbook explanations are not enough for learners to fully acquire the modal verbs, and further instruction is required. Hita (2008) argues that oral comprehension and production can be mastered through listening exercises, discussions with the teacher and questions about the conversations afterwards. Improvement in writing can be obtained through workbook exercises followed by reviewing answers and mistakes.

### 5.5.3. Lexical verbs

There is no consensus on the best approach to grammar instruction. While some researchers emphasise the need for explicit instruction, others argue that grammar is mostly acquired through input (see Loewen, 2020 for an overview of such researchers and their ideas). It is beyond the scope of the present study to elaborate on the advantages and disadvantages of explicit and implicit grammar instruction. However, there is evidence for the usefulness of exercises that focus on specific elements of lexical verbs. For example, Collins (2007) suggests that exposure to forms in many different contexts is of importance for the acquisition of all tenses. Moreover, context-manipulating exercises, in which learners need to choose the correct tense, can be useful to induce students to notice the distinction between for example the present perfect and the simple past. This may be beneficial for Italian learners as well, since they make mistakes when using these tenses.

Other examples of grammar instruction include consciousness-raising tasks, input-based instruction, output-based instruction, and explicit instruction (see Loewen, 2020).

For Italian learners of English, in particular, the results of the present study point to the need for focus on different verb tenses, the use of the progressive, the word “to”, do-support and subject-verb agreement (especially the *-s* morpheme in the third person singular).

## 6. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to answer the following question: Is there evidence of transfer errors from L1 Italian to L3 English in the writings of children collected in the LEONIDE corpus? The focus was on errors in the usage of articles, modal verbs, and lexical verbs.

The predictions made about the usage of articles were largely confirmed by the results: there is evidence of transfer errors in the usage of articles. While most mistakes can be traced back to the L1, Italian, more research is needed on null article contexts to discover whether or not all child L2 learners of English make similar mistakes.

The predictions made about the usage of modal verbs were also largely confirmed by the results: not all modal verbs were used, while some were overused. The overuse of *must* is likely due to L1 transfer, but other transfer errors were not detected. It cannot be decided whether the absence of some modal verbs is due to L1 transfer or due to the fact that the participants are beginning learners. The fact that more modal verbs were used in the third year of data collection in comparison to the first and second years suggests that the latter explanation might be true.

The predictions made about the usage of lexical verbs were again largely confirmed by the results. While errors such as the omission of *-s* and *do*-support as well as the absence of auxiliaries in interrogative sentences could be traced back to influence of the L1, research has pointed out that these are mistakes many learners of English make, regardless of their language background. Overgeneralization errors and tense errors again do not point to L1 transfer but are rather common for language learners. L1 influence was found in the overuse of the verb *make* as well as in errors with the marker “to” and the *-ing* morpheme.

This all illustrates that there is evidence of transfer errors in the writings of children with L1 Italian who are acquiring English. However, many mistakes found in the data are

common for all learners of English, regardless of their L1 background and/or previous language knowledge. In some cases, it cannot be decided which has the greater influence.

Future research could focus on older Italian learners of English to discover which mistakes are persistent and which fade with age and length of exposure. Moreover, a comparison between learners with different language backgrounds could give insights into mistakes that are L1-specific and mistakes that are made by all learners.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: picture story task in Year 1

Adopted from Glaznieks et al., 2022, p. 118.

#### Appendix 1. Example of a picture story task (year 1, L3 English), E.O. Plauen: *Der Schmöker*

##### *A picture story*

What has happened here? Look at the pictures and write the story! Try to write something for every picture.



## Appendix 2: opinion text task in Year 2

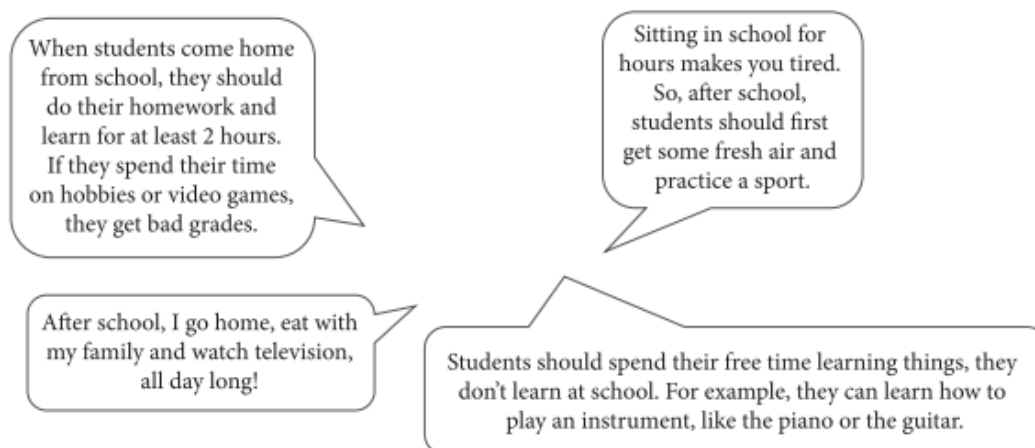
Adopted from Glaznieks et al., 2022, p. 119.

### Appendix 2. Example of an opinion text task (year 2, L3 English)

#### *What are your ideas?*

Teenagers have to spend a big part of their day in school. But what do they do in the afternoon, when school lessons have ended? How can they use their free time in a good way?

Here are some ideas, how students at middle-school should spend their free time:



#### **What do you think? How should students spend their free time after school?**

- How much time should students spend on homework and learning? Why?
- How much time should students spend on homework and learning? Why?
- What do you do after school? How do you spend your free time and why?

We, the researchers of the EURAC, want your opinion on homework, hobbies and free time! You have 20 minutes to write your text.