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Types, frequency, and coping strategies of Wolaitato language interference in Grade 11 students' English speaking skills in Wolaita Zone, Ethiopia

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Abstract

This study investigated the types and frequency of Wolayttatto mother tongue interference in the English speaking skills of grade 11 students in Wolaita Zone, Ethiopia, and examined the coping strategies employed by teachers to mitigate this influence. Guided by an exploratory-descriptive qualitative design, data were generated through recorded oral speaking activities, non-participant classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews with six English language teachers. The analysis of the recorded speech data identified four categories of interference: phonological, grammatical, lexical, and morphological. Phonological interference was the most frequent, accounting for 179 of 282 total errors (63.5%), predominantly involving consonant substitutions (e.g., /f/↔/p/, /v/→/b/, /θ/,/ð/→/t/,/s/,/z/) and prothetic vowel insertion. Grammatical interference ranked second (55 errors, 19.5%), followed by lexical (34 errors, 12.1%) and morphological (14 errors, 4.9%) interference. Classroom observation data and teacher interview findings corroborated and triangulated these results, consistently identifying phonological transfer as the most significant challenge. The study recommends targeted pronunciation instruction using minimal pair drills, contrastive phonological analysis, communicative language teaching approaches, explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction, and increased learner exposure to authentic English input as effective strategies for reducing mother tongue interference in multilingual EFL contexts.

1 Introduction

English functions as both the official medium of instruction and a critical tool for academic achievement and professional advancement in Ethiopia's secondary and tertiary education systems. Proficiency in English is increasingly recognized as a prerequisite for success in English-Medium Instruction (EMI) settings and for participation in a globalized knowledge economy [1]. Within this landscape, speaking is the most socially immediate and professionally visible of the four language skills. Employers consistently prioritize graduates who can communicate effectively in spoken English [2], and the ability to interact spontaneously in the target language is widely considered a hallmark of communicative competence [3].

Despite years of formal instruction, many secondary school learners in Ethiopia continue to experience persistent difficulties in spoken English. These difficulties are commonly associated with restricted vocabulary, inadequate grammatical knowledge, limited opportunities for authentic practice, and interference from learners' first language (L1) [4, 5]. Language interference or negative transfer occurs when phonological, grammatical, lexical, or morphological patterns from L1 are inadvertently applied to the target language, producing non-native forms that deviate from standard English usage [6].

In the Wolaita Zone, located in the Southern Ethiopia Region, Grade 11 students conduct their daily social interactions predominantly in Wolayttatto, a Cushitic language with phonological and structural features that diverge substantially from English. While Wolayttatto interference has been noted anecdotally by practitioners, empirical documentation of the specific types, frequency, and instructional implications of

this interference in the context of spoken English remains limited. Existing studies either address interference in writing, focus on different regional languages or lack the language-specific granularity required to inform targeted pedagogical interventions [7].

The present study addresses this gap by empirically examining the interference of Wolaytta in the English speaking performance of Grade 11 students. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the types of Wolayttatto interference are manifested in Grade 11 students' English speaking skills?
2. How frequently do the identified types of Wolayttatto interference occur in students' spoken English?
3. What coping strategies do teachers employ to overcome Wolayttatto interference in English speaking lessons?

By systematically documenting interference patterns and the strategies used to address them, this study contributes to the growing body of applied linguistics research on cross-linguistic influence in multilingual EFL contexts and provides actionable insights for teachers, curriculum designers, and language policy practitioners in Ethiopia and in comparable settings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Conceptualizing Language Interference

Language interference is a well-established concept in second language acquisition (SLA) research that refers to the influence of a learner's L1 on the production of the target language. Weinreich [6] defined interference as instances of cross-linguistic deviation attributable to contact between two language systems, manifesting as foreign accents and structural deviations in both oral and written productions. Hornberger [8] and Anasonye [9] similarly noted that there is interlingua interference when using English as a second language, where the L1 and target language differ substantially in phonology, grammar, and lexis. Understanding the nature of such interference is essential for designing effective instruction, particularly in high-stakes EFL environments, such as Ethiopian secondary schools.

2.2 Types of Language Interference

Weinreich [6] classified language interference into phonological, grammatical, and lexical types, a taxonomy subsequently refined by Rahayu and Basri [10] to include morphological interference as a distinct category. These classifications provide an analytical framework for the present study.

2.2.1 Phonological Interference

Phonological interference arises when learners substitute or distort target language sounds using phonemes available in their L1 [11]. Such interference can lead to reduced intelligibility, increased

anxiety, and diminished participation in oral activities [12]. Wardani and Suwartono [13] demonstrated this phenomenon among Javanese EFL learners, who systematically substituted English phonemes that were absent from their L1 inventory. Recent research confirms that phonological interference is particularly pronounced when target-language sounds lack equivalents in the learner's L1 [14, 15].

2.2.2 Grammatical and Morphological Interference

Grammatical interference encompasses the transfer of L1 syntactic patterns including word order, subject-verb agreement, auxiliary verb usage, and tense marking to the target language [6]. Morphological interference, a closely related phenomenon, specifically affects word formation and inflectional marking, manifesting as errors in pluralization, possessive constructions, comparisons, and derivational forms [16]. Ellis [17] demonstrated that L1 syntactic transfer produces structurally incomplete sentences among EFL learners, a finding corroborated by [18] in Arabic EFL contexts.

2.2.3 Lexical Interference

Lexical interference occurs when learners draw on L1 vocabulary items either through direct translation, code-mixing, or inappropriate word choice when producing the target language [6]. Khan and Krishnasamy [19] further established a strong positive relationship between vocabulary breadth and oral communicative performance among EFL learners.

2.3 The Wolayttatto Phonological System

Wakasa [20] provides a comprehensive phonological description of Wolayttatto, identifying notable features, including three-way stop contrasts and phonemic length distinctions. Crucially, the Wolayttatto phonemic inventory lacks several sounds present in English, including the labiodental fricative /f/, labiodental approximant /v/, and dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/. Additionally, Wolayttatto syllable structure generally avoids initial consonant clusters, a constraint that has predictable consequences for learners' production of English words with complex onsets. While [20] work established the theoretical linguistic foundation, no prior study has empirically examined how these phonological properties systematically affect Grade 11 students' English speaking performance.

2.4 Speaking in EFL Contexts

Speaking is widely regarded as the most central productive language skill [2] and the primary vehicle through which communicative competence is developed and demonstrated [21]. However, EFL learners frequently exhibit a reluctance to communicate in the target language, a phenomenon attributable to low motivation, fear of negative evaluation, limited grammatical and phonological knowledge, and excessive L1 reliance [22]. Dewaele and MacIntyre [23] demonstrated that affective variables including anxiety and confidence exert a significant influence on learners' willingness to communicate, and that these variables are in turn shaped by the classroom environment and instructional practice.

2.5 Strategies for Minimising Mother Tongue Interference

Empirical research has identified a range of instructional strategies that are effective in reducing mother tongue interference in EFL speaking contexts. These include explicit contrastive phonological instruction and minimal pair drills [24]. Chen and Bin Shuib [25] systematic review of empirical studies on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in EFL classrooms found that CLT fosters meaningful interaction in the target language and positively influences learners' language proficiency, though its success varies with contextual implementation and alignment with learners' proficiency levels, regular exposure to authentic spoken English input, and contextualized vocabulary development activities [26, 27]. Conversely, barriers to improvement include learners' overreliance on their mother tongue, limited out-of-class English exposure, and insufficient pronunciation-focused instruction [28, 29].

2.6 Research Gap and Rationale

Despite the body of literature on L1 interference in EFL contexts, research specifically examining Wolayttatto interference in English-speaking skills is sparse. Karim and Nassaji [7] addressed L1 interference in L2 writing, but did not examine oral production in their study. Monib and Hadi investigated the determinants of undergraduate English speaking ability but focused on pedagogical rather than linguistic factors [30]. This study addresses these gaps by providing a systematic, language-specific investigation of interference types and their frequency in Wolayttatto-speaking Grade 11 students' spoken English, alongside an examination of teacher-reported coping strategies.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Paradigm

This study employed an exploratory-descriptive qualitative research design grounded in the interpretivist and constructivist epistemological paradigms. Qualitative inquiry was selected as the most appropriate approach because the study aimed to understand the nature and patterns of Wolayttatto interference as lived and perceived by learners and teachers, rather than generalizing from a large sample or establishing causal relationships [31]. An exploratory descriptive design is well-suited to investigate understudied phenomena, as it allows for the identification of types and themes in the data while maintaining openness to emerging patterns [32].

3.2 Study Setting

This study was conducted in the Wolaita Zone, located in the Southern Ethiopia Region. The zone comprises 16 woredas (districts) and eight administrative towns. It was selected because Wolayttatto is the dominant language of daily communication from the primary to the secondary school level, making it an ecologically valid setting for investigating L1 interference in English speaking. Of the 82 public secondary schools in the zone, three were selected through simple random sampling to serve as the research sites. The target population comprised Grade 11 Wolayttatto-speaking students, this grade level being the point at which all subjects except those in certain administrative towns are taught exclusively in English.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling, a strategy widely employed in qualitative research to identify individuals who can provide information-rich accounts relevant to the phenomenon under investigation [33]. The eligibility criteria required that the student participants speak Wolayttatto as their first language without dialectal variation. Eight Grade 11 students were selected for the recorded speaking activities. Guest and others [34] established that six to twelve participants are generally sufficient to achieve thematic saturation in qualitative interviews, identifying approximately 90% of the emergent themes. The present sample was consistent with this benchmark.

Six experienced Grade 11 English language teachers participated in semi-structured interviews for this study. Teacher participants were included to provide practitioner perspectives on the type, frequency, and classroom management of Wolayttatto interference. Additionally, four non-participant classroom observations were conducted across the three sample schools to generate supplementary and triangulate data.

3.4 Data Collection Instruments

Three complementary data collection instruments were employed to enable the triangulation of findings.

Oral recordings: With informed consent, student participants engaged in unstructured speaking activities centered on self-introduction and discussion of their personal academic and social plans. These naturally occurring speaking contexts were selected to elicit authentic spoken production without the constraints of formal examinations. Speech samples were recorded using audio and video equipment and were subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Semi-structured teacher interviews: Individual interviews were conducted with six Grade 11 English language teachers to elicit their professional observations regarding the types, frequency, and pedagogical management of Wolayttatt'so interference. Semi-structured questioning allowed for consistency across participants and exploration of emergent themes.

Classroom observations: Non-participant observations were scheduled in each sample school during English language speaking lessons. Observations focused on documenting interference instances as they occurred naturally and identifying instructional strategies employed by teachers in response to observed interference.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework described by [35]: familiarization with the data, initial code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and writing. Student speech transcripts were coded for interference type (phonological, grammatical, lexical, or morphological) and frequency of occurrence. To quantify the interference frequency, the proportion formula described by Nangle and colleagues [36] was employed:

Proportion of errors (%) = (Total number of L1 interference errors / Total number of all errors) × 100

Interview transcripts and observation field notes were thematically analyzed to identify recurrent patterns in teachers' perceptions and practices. The convergence of findings across the three data sources was used to establish credibility and conformability [37].

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical clearance from the Research Ethics Committee of Wolaita Sodo University, and permission letters were obtained from the relevant educational authorities and participating schools prior to the data collection. All the participants provided written informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and the participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage. All data were anonymized, with student participants assigned codes (P_1–P_8) and observation data labelled (Ob_1–Ob_4). This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) [38] and its subsequent amendments.

4 Results

Data were generated from three sources: oral recordings of eight grade 11 students (P_1–P_8), semi-structured interviews with six English language teachers, and four non-participant classroom observations (Ob_1–Ob_4). The results are organized around the three research questions.

4.1 Teacher Participant Characteristics

Table 1 presents the demographic and professional backgrounds of the six teacher participants.

Table 1
Background characteristics of teacher participants (N = 6)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age (years)	Below 41	5	83.33
	41 and above	1	16.67
	Total	6	100
Gender	Female	4	66.67
	Male	2	33.33
	Total	6	100
Educational qualification	Bachelor's degree	3	50.00
	Master's degree	3	50.00
	Total	6	100
Teaching experience (years)	Below 18	5	83.33
	18 and above	1	16.67
	Total	6	100

4.2 Types of Wolayttatto Interference in English Speaking

Analysis of the recorded speech samples revealed four categories of Wolayttatto interference: phonological, grammatical, lexical, and morphological. These types were subsequently corroborated through classroom observation data and interviews with teachers. Phonological interference was consistently the most dominant category across all data sources, followed by grammatical, lexical and morphological interference.

4.2.1 Phonological Interference

Phonological interference was the most pervasive and systematic type identified in all data sources. Four distinct phonological patterns were identified.

i Consonant substitution: /f/ ↔ /p/**.** The most frequent phonological pattern was the bidirectional substitution of /f/ and /p/, attributable to the absence of a clear fricative-plosive contrast in the Wolayttatto phonemic inventory. In response to the question “Would you tell me about yourself and your family?” P_1 produced “ma□ pæm□l□ is mozer, pazer, sister” (target: “My family members are mother, father, and sister”). Similarly, P_1 responded to a question about future plans with “in p□□□t□□r am a doctor” (target: “In the future, I would like to be a doctor”). P_4 stated “yes, p□zər p□□rm□ŋ” (target: “Yes, I help my father by farming”). This substitution pattern was systematic across all student participants, indicating robust phonological transfer rather than individual errors.

ii Consonant substitution: /v/ → /b/. Wolayttatto lacks the labiodental fricative /v/, leading learners to substitute the bilabial stop /b/. In classroom observation Ob_1, S_3 stated “b□ri □□d” (target: “very good”); in Ob_4, S_2 produced “bælj□bəl □k□sf□riəns” (target:“valuable experience”). These substitutions were consistent across all speaking activities and observations.

1. Substitution of dental fricatives /θ/ and /ð/. The voiceless dental fricative /θ/ and voiced dental fricative /ð/ are absent from Wolayttatto, resulting in their substitution with alveolar fricatives /s/ and /z/ or the alveolar stop /t/. Representative examples include P_1’s production of “m□zər” for “mother” and “p□zər” for “father,” and S_6’s (Ob_2) utterance “zæt z□r □r fi□□plə” for “that there are people.”
2. Prothetic vowel insertion: Consistent with Wolayttatto’s phonotactic constraint against initial consonant clusters, students regularly inserted the prothetic vowel /□/ to break up cluster onsets. P_1 produced “□□l□bən” for “eleven” and “□sk□□l” for “school”; Ob_1 S_2 pronounced “□stu□dənt” for “student.”

4.2.2 Grammatical Interference

Grammatical interference was the second most frequent type, characterized by the transfer of Wolayttatto syntactic patterns into English. Five error subtypes were identified: incomplete sentences with omitted subjects or verbs (P_2: “yes, who my p□zər” for “the one who supports my plan is my father”); mother-tongue word order (P_4: “he works fæstə□ræl□st” for “his work is pasteurizing”); omission of conjunctions and auxiliary verbs (P_5: omission of “and” and “members” in describing family composition); overgeneralization of grammatical rules; and incorrect tense usage. Observation data provided additional examples, including S_3 ob_1) “my d□□be□□ən □z □e□dy□ke□□ən” for “I am debating in support of education” and S_5 ob_2) using the conditional structure “when we are doing □sf□rt, you break your leg” for the intended “if you break your leg while doing sport.”

4.2.3 Lexical Interference

Lexical interference manifested in four forms: direct translation from Wolayttatto (P_6 responding entirely in Wolayttatto to a question about plans); production of semantically incoherent or absurd chunks (P_6:“yes, from□s and home m□zər. w□rk m□ni n□t □□d f□□nt”); inappropriate word selection (P_4: “teacher work” for “teaching job”); and incorrect tense use (P_1: “in p□□t□□r I am a doctor” for “I would like to be a doctor in the future”).Classroom observations yielded parallel examples, including code-mixing with local Wolayttatto terms during speaking activities (Ob_2 S_5: “or the one locally we say /hi□l□/?”).

4.2.4 Morphological Interference

Morphological interference, the least frequent type, presented as: incorrect word formation (P_4: “teacher work” for “teaching job”); omission of possessive ‘s (P_3: “p□zər name is Deneke” for “my father’s name is Deneke”); incorrect pluralization (P_5: “childrens”); and incorrect comparative forms (Ob_2 S_2: “□sf□rt is □□dər zæn education” for “sport is better than education”). These errors are consistent with the morphological interference taxonomy proposed by [16].

4.3 Frequency of Wolayttatto Interference

Table 2 presents the frequency of each type of interference across the eight student participants. A total of 282 interference errors were identified in the recorded speech sample.

Table 2
Frequency of Wolayttatto interference errors by type and participant

Participant	Phonological	Grammatical	Lexical	Morphological	Total
P_1	15	7	7	4	33
P_2	13	9	2	1	25
P_3	9	5	2	1	17
P_4	18	7	4	1	30
P_5	19	7	5	2	33
P_6	17	5	4	1	27
P_7	18	5	3	3	29
P_8	70	10	7	1	88
Total	179	55	34	14	282
Proportion (%)	63.5	19.5	12.1	4.9	100

Phonological interference was the most frequent type, accounting for 179 errors (63.5% of all identified errors). This dominance confirms that the phonological differences between Wolayttatto and English constitute the most significant barrier to intelligibility in students' spoken English. The high proportion of phonological errors particularly /f/↔/p/ substitutions, which occurred consistently across all participants indicates that these are systematic and rule-governed phenomena rather than random performance errors.

Grammatical interference ranked second, with 55 errors (19.5%), reflecting the structural divergence between Wolayttatto and English sentence organization. Lexical interference accounted for 34 errors (12.1%), indicating a moderate but consistent reliance on L1 vocabulary resources. Morphological interference was the least frequent at 14 errors (4.9%), suggesting that word-structure errors, while present, were less systematic than phonological and syntactic transfer.

4.3.1 Triangulation with Classroom Observation Data

Classroom observation data strongly corroborated and reinforced the frequency patterns derived from the oral recordings. Phonological interference was the most frequent and systematic type in all four observations. The /f/↔/p/ substitution pattern was particularly pervasive: in Ob_1, S_2 stated "my name is

p□□rst □p all tæŋk you z□s chance" (target: "First of all, thank you for this chance; my name is..."); in Ob_4, S_1 stated "□sf□□rt man is gooder than education man" (target: "A sportsman is better than an educated man"). The /v/→/b/ substitution was similarly pervasive (Ob_1 S_3: "b□ri b□ri necessary" for "very necessary"; Ob_3 S_3: "education is b□ri high role in the world" for "education has a very important role in the world"). Dental fricative substitution and prothetic vowel insertion also occurred consistently across the observations.

Grammatical errors including incorrect word order, omitted auxiliaries, tense errors, and preposition omission were observed at a moderate level, as were lexical errors reflecting direct translation and limited vocabularies. Morphological errors were less frequent but present, particularly in comparative forms and pluralization errors. These findings are fully consistent with the frequency data in Table 2, strengthening the credibility and confirmability of the study's findings.

4.4 Coping Strategies for Wolayttatto Interference

Teacher interview data identified a coherent set of instructional strategies for addressing Wolayttatto interference in grade 11 English speaking classes. These strategies are organized according to the type of interference.

Phonological strategies

All six teachers emphasized the need for systematic pronunciation instruction that targets the specific substitution patterns identified in this study. Recommended practices included minimal pair drills for /f/ versus /p/ and /v/ versus /b/ contrasts, articulation exercises for /θ/ and /ð/, auditory discrimination tasks using authentic spoken English, and ongoing corrective feedback on pronunciation errors. Contrastive phonological analysis was considered particularly effective in raising learners' awareness of the differences between the Wolayttatto and English sound systems.

As noted by one of the teachers, *"Students say 'pish' for 'fish' and 'bery' for 'very', so we practice these sounds again and again using pairs"* (T_2). Another teacher added, *"When I compare Wolayttatto sounds with English, they start to notice their mistakes by themselves"* (T_4).

Grammatical and morphological strategies

Five of the six teachers reported using explicit grammar instruction with contrastive examples drawn from both Wolayttatto and English. The key areas of focus included subject-verb agreement, auxiliary verb usage, tense marking, sentence-level word order, possessive constructions, and pluralization. Reducing learners' reliance on mother-tongue translation during speaking activities was also identified as a priority.

One teacher explained, *"Students often say 'He go to school yesterday', so I correct them and show the correct tense clearly"* (T_1). Another teacher remarked *"They think in Wolayttatto and translate directly, so I encourage them to think in English when speaking"* (T_5).

Lexical strategies

Teachers recommended contextualized vocabulary instruction using sentence frames and collocation activities, coupled with explicit instruction on the distinctions between Wolayttatto vocabulary structures and their English equivalents. Increased exposure to authentic English materials (listening and reading) was highlighted as being essential for expanding learners'L_2 lexical resources.

As T_6 stated *"Students may know the word, but they cannot use it correctly in a sentence, so I give them sentence patterns."* Another teacher added that *"Listening and reading help them understand how words are used naturally, not just translated"* (T_3).

Communicative and Affective Strategies

All teachers identified Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approaches including debates, role plays, and discussion activities—as fundamental to building speaking confidence and reducing anxiety-driven L1 reliance. Creating a supportive classroom environment where learners feel safe to take communicative risks and providing encouragement and constructive feedback are essential components of effective interference management (Liaqat et al., 2025; Ejaz et al., 2025).

One teacher noted, *"During role plays and discussions, students try to speak English more even if they make mistakes"* (T_2). Another emphasized, *"If the classroom is not supportive, students prefer Wolayttatto, but when they feel comfortable, they try English"* (T_4)

4.4.1 Classification of Errors based on the Source

Results presented in Table 2 shows a summary of errors from mother tongue interferences (Ll) and errors from incomplete learning.

Table 2
Classification of Errors based on Source:

A. Mother Tongue Interference **(L1-Based Errors)**	**Developmental / Other Interference (Intralingual Errors)**
Definition: Errors caused by transfer of Wolayttatto linguistic features into English [14].	**Definition**: Errors caused by learners' internal development of English knowledge [17]
Phonological Errors: Substitution and insertion of sounds.	**Overgeneralization**: Applying one rule too broadly.
Examples: "pish" (fish), "bery" (very), "tink" (think), "estudent" (student).	*Examples*: "gooder" (better), "childrens" (children), "comed" (came).
Cause: Absence or difference of sounds in Wolayttatto phonology [15].	**Cause**: Applying one rule of English to all contexts [17].
Grammatical Errors: Word order transfer from L1.	Simplification: Omitting necessary elements.
Examples: "I to school go" (I go to school), "She coffee drinks" (She drinks coffee).	**Examples**: "Yes, wash and cook" (Yes, I wash and cook), "He going school" (He is going to school).
Cause: Direct translation of Wolayttatto sentence structure [38].	**Cause**: Reducing complexity due to limited proficiency [41].
Lexical Errors: Direct translation and code-mixing.	Wrong Word Choice: Inappropriate vocabulary use.
Examples: "teacher work" (teaching job), mixing Wolayttatto words in English sentences.	**Examples**: "teacher work" (teaching job), "make a party" (have a party), "do a mistake" (make a mistake).
Cause: Conceptual transfer from L1 meaning system is influenced by how bilingual speakers manage cross-linguistic competition and select meanings based on activation strength across languages [39].	**Cause**: Limited vocabulary and incomplete lexical knowledge can hinder learners' ability to access, retrieve, and appropriately use target words during language production, affecting overall communicative performance [42].
Morphological Errors: Incorrect use or omission of inflections.	**Incorrect Rule Application**: Errors in tense and inflection.
Examples: "father name" (father's name), "two book" (two books), "she go yesterday" (she went yesterday).	**Examples**: "She goed to school" (She went to school), "He don't likes coffee" (He doesn't like coffee).
Cause: Structural differences between [40]explains that differences between Wolayttatto and English morphological structures can lead learners to make errors in word formation and inflection.	**Cause**: Incomplete mastery of English grammatical Developmental (intralingual) errors occur when learners apply incomplete or emerging grammatical rules of the target language during speech production, reflecting the natural developmental stages of interlanguage rather than L1 influence [43].

4.4.2 Analytical Interpretation

The analysis clearly demonstrates that not all errors observed in this study are caused by mother tongue interference, which strengthens the validity of the findings. Phonological errors such as /f/ ↔ /p/ and /v/ → /b/ strongly reflect Wolayttatto influence due to the absence of equivalent sounds in the native language. This supports previous research indicating that pronunciation is the most affected aspect of speaking when L1 and L2 phonological systems differ significantly [14, 15]. However, several grammatical and morphological errors, such as *gooder* and *childrens*, cannot be explained by L1 transfer. Instead, they are developmental errors resulting from learners' internal processing of English rules. This aligns with the argument that learners actively construct their interlanguage system through hypothesis testing and overgeneralization [17, 41].

Moreover, research suggests that while L1 interference is more prominent at early stages of language learning, developmental errors tend to persist across different proficiency levels as part of the natural acquisition process [38] Therefore, the errors identified in this study reflect cross-linguistic influence and universal learning mechanisms, rather than a single source.

5 Discussion

The findings of this study are broadly consistent with the current scholarship on L1 interference in EFL contexts and extend this body of research to a previously understudied linguistic context. The dominance of phonological interference (63.5% of all errors) aligns with recent evidence that pronunciation is the most affected dimension of speaking when the target language contains phonemes that are absent from the learner's L1 inventory [15, 14]. The specific substitution patterns identified in this study (/f/↔/p/, /v/→/b/, /θ/,/ð/→/t/,/s/,/z/, and prothetic vowel insertion) are directly predictable from the Wolayttatto phonological system described by [20], confirming that these errors are systematic and language-specific, rather than idiosyncratic. This finding has important instructional implications: because phonological errors are rule-governed and predictable, they are amenable to targeted, contrastive instruction.

The moderate frequency of grammatical interference (19.5%) is consistent with recent research demonstrating that learners systematically transfer L1 syntactic patterns into English production, resulting in incomplete, incorrectly ordered, or structurally non-target-like utterances [17, 41, 18]. The finding that errors in auxiliary usage, subject-verb agreement, and sentence-level word order are the most frequent grammatical interference types reflects the fundamental structural divergence between Wolayttatto and English, particularly with respect to verb phrase morphology and argument structure.

Lexical interference (12.1%) in the form of direct translation, inappropriate word choice, and code-mixing is consistent with research showing that limited L2 lexical knowledge leads learners to rely on L1 resources, often resulting in semantically inaccurate or pragmatically unsuitable expressions [44]. The occurrence of entirely Wolayttatto-medium responses to English questions (as observed for P_6) suggests that some students' L2 vocabulary resources are insufficient to sustain even minimally

adequate communicative participation, highlighting the importance of explicit and intensive vocabulary development in speaking instruction.

Morphological interference, the least frequent type (4.9%), manifested identifiable patterns of error in possessive marking, pluralization, and comparative formation. This finding aligns with [45, 40], who noted that morphological errors, while present in EFL learner speech, are generally less salient than phonological and syntactic deviations. The framework proposed by [16] proved analytically productive for categorizing morphological errors observed in this study.

The role of affective factors particularly anxiety, low confidence, and fear of negative evaluation in intensifying L1 reliance during speaking activities is supported by the teacher interview data and is consistent with [23] and [46]. These findings underscore the importance of addressing not only the linguistic but also the affective dimensions of interference by creating supportive, risk-tolerant classroom environments.

Taken together, the consistency between oral recording data, classroom observation data, and teacher interview data across all four interference types provides robust triangulated evidence that Wolayttatto transfer constitutes a systematic and multilevel challenge to Grade 11 students' English speaking proficiency. The pattern of interference identified in this study mirrors findings from comparable EFL contexts globally [7] and [32] suggesting that L1 interference is a predictable and manageable feature of multilingual EFL learning, rather than an exceptional or pathological one.

6 Pedagogical and Theoretical Implications

The findings of this study have several implications for language teaching practice, curriculum design, and applied linguistics research in multilingual EFL contexts.

For classroom practice, the dominance of phonological interference indicates that pronunciation instruction should be accorded higher priority in Grade 11 English curricula in the Wolaita Zone and comparable multilingual settings. Specifically, instruction should incorporate minimal pair drills targeting /f/–/p/ and /v/–/b/ contrasts, explicit articulation practice for dental fricatives, and awareness-raising activities based on contrastive analysis of Wolayttatto and English phonological systems. These activities should be integrated into communicative speaking tasks rather than delivered in isolation so that accuracy gains are accompanied by corresponding gains in fluency and confidence [15].

The co-occurrence of grammatical, lexical, and morphological interference suggests that explicit grammar and vocabulary instruction should complement pronunciation. Grammar instruction should explicitly draw on contrastive analysis to highlight the structural differences between Wolayttatto and English, particularly with respect to sentence-level word order, auxiliary verb use, and tense marking. Vocabulary instruction should prioritize contextual learning over rote memorization, emphasizing collocational knowledge and the communicative functions of vocabulary items [19].

At the theoretical level, this study contributes empirical evidence from an understudied language pair (Wolayttatto–English) to the cross-linguistic influence literature, demonstrating that the types and patterns of L1 interference identified in well-documented language pairs typologically diverse language pairs [17].

7 Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations of the present study should be acknowledged when interpreting these findings. First, the study was conducted in three secondary schools in the Wolaita Zone; the extent to which the findings generalize to other schools in the zone or to other Wolayttatto-speaking communities is not established. Second, the participant sample was necessarily small (eight students, six teachers), consistent with qualitative research conventions but insufficient to support broad quantitative generalizations. Third, speaking data were elicited through a limited range of topics (self-introduction, personal and academic plans), which may not reflect the full range of students' speaking performance in different communicative contexts. Finally, the study did not employ longitudinal methods, precluding the observation of how interference patterns change over time as learners' English proficiency develops.

Future research could address these limitations by (a) conducting larger-scale, multi-site studies spanning multiple zones and linguistic regions of Ethiopia to enhance generalizability; (b) employing longitudinal designs to track interference patterns across academic years; (c) using mixed-methods designs that combine qualitative depth with quantitative breadth; (d) investigating a wider range of speaking contexts to obtain a more comprehensive profile of students' oral production; and (e) designing and evaluating classroom interventions based on the findings of the present study to assess the effectiveness of targeted pronunciation and grammar instruction in reducing Wolayttatto interference.

8 Conclusion

This study provides systematic empirical documentation of Wolayttatto interference in Grade 11 students' English speaking skills in the Wolaita Zone, Ethiopia. Four types of interference were identified: phonological, grammatical, lexical, and morphological interference. Phonological interference was the most frequent and systematic category, accounting for 63.5% of all errors. The specific phonological patterns observed (/f/↔/p/, /v/→/b/, dental fricative substitution, prothetic vowel insertion) are directly attributable to the structural properties of the Wolayttatto phonological system, confirming the predictive value of contrastive analysis for this language pair. Grammatical, lexical, and morphological interference also contributed to communication difficulties, reflecting the broader structural and vocabulary divergences between the two languages.

The convergence of evidence across oral recordings, classroom observations, and teacher interviews strengthens the credibility of these findings and provides a robust empirical basis for the recommendations proposed in this study. To reduce Wolayttatto interference and enhance students' spoken English proficiency, the study recommends prioritizing systematic pronunciation instruction,

communicative language teaching approaches, explicit contrastive grammar and vocabulary instruction, and the creation of supportive classroom environments that encourage learners to take risks in the target language. These strategies, implemented in a sustained and integrated manner, offer the most promising pathway for improving English speaking outcomes for Wolayttatto-speaking learners in multilingual educational contexts.

Declarations

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Author Contributions

A.D. conceived and designed the study, conducted data collection and analysis, interpreted the findings, and drafted the manuscript. H.W. and F.M. provided critical supervision, conceptual guidance and editorial input. All the authors have reviewed and approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability

The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable requests.

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical Approval: This study received ethical approval from the Research, Publication, Ethics, and Dissemination Directorate of Wolaita Sodo University on 15th April 2025 (Reference No. WSU 41/53/419). The research was carried out in accordance with the protocol, informed consent procedures, and information sheet requirements approved by the Ethical Committee of Wolaita Sodo

University. All research procedures were carried out in line with the university's ethical standards and regulations governing PhD dissertation research. Required permissions were secured from the relevant department, and the selected schools were officially authorized to participate in the study. This research formed part of a PhD dissertation at Wolaita Sodo University and strictly followed the institution's ethical guidelines for doctoral studies. Prior to data collection, an official introductory letter, signed by the institutional representative, was submitted to the selected schools to obtain permission and ensure cooperation. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, with institutional approval granted by the schools and voluntary agreement provided by individual students. Participants were clearly informed of their rights, including the freedom to withdraw from the study at any time, in accordance with university regulations.

Informed consent

All procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the relevant institutional and national research committees and with the principles outlined in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical guidelines. Informed oral consent was obtained from all participants before their participation in the study. As the student participants were Grade 11 secondary school students (aged 16–18 years), informed consent was also obtained from the parents or legally authorized representatives of any participants under the age of 18, in accordance with institutional requirements. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any consequences. This research employed a descriptive design in which students' spoken responses were recorded and analyzed to identify errors that might result from mother tongue interference or other related factors.

Accordance/Ethical Guidelines: All research procedures involving human participants were conducted in accordance with relevant guidelines and regulations, including the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki (1964) and its subsequent amendments (https://www.wma.net/policies-post/wma-declaration-of-helsinki/).Institutional and administrative permission letters were obtained from the relevant educational authorities and participating schools prior to data collection.

Consent to Publish

Not applicable.

Clinical Trial Number

Clinical trial number, not applicable

Competing Interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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