UNDERSTANDING LANGUAGE TRANSFER AND ERRORS ANALYSIS TRANSFER OR NOT: I AM THE BIGGEST IN MY FAMILY!

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ABSTRACT:
Correcting students' language errors has always received much importance because of its significance for analyzing those errors and trying to provide students and teachers with adequate techniques and strategies to avoid or at least minimize the number of errors committed while practising the foreign languages. This article will focus mainly on different ways in which an interest in language learner has revealed different aspects of the language learning process and suggested different ways of treating errors in our teaching. The objectives of the paper are mainly to understand the origins of an interest in errors that learners made and the related development of the concept of interlanguage **,** to appreciate the significance of learner error and how it might affect our methodology and to realise some of the causes of errors including positive and negative transfer. Furthermore, the article will explain the concept of systematic variability in learner language in order to become aware of some of the causes and significances of variability.
Keywords :Contrastive Analysis, Error Analysis, Interlanguage, Mother Tongue, Variability

1. Introduction:

Before 1970, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research was dominated by Contrastive Analysis (CA) research. The purpose of that research was to test the CA Hypothesis' idea that learners' errors could be predicted on the basis of differences between the learners' first language and the target language. Linguists compared languages to see what the differences were and then used those data to predict the transfer errors learners would make. It was hoped that the data from linguists could eventually be used to help design special drills and exercises that would help learners learn accurate use of second languages but not make any errors while doing so. The prevailing view of errors at that time was that errors were bad habits that must be broken and not reinforced. They were viewed as harmful. Experts felt that errors had to be avoided, even in the course of learning, and for decades SLA researchers worked toward this goal.

By 1970**1.** , it was clear that CA could not predict the errors learners would make, therefore, researchers concluded that their must be some other processes involved in second language learning besides interference. As researchers discovered many errors that were clearly not due to interference, it became safe to assume that there must be other sources of errors besides the first language. Researchers then, shifted their focus from predicting errors based on contrasting language, to classifying the various kinds of errors they saw learners making. it was hoped that by studying the various types of errors that learners made at various stages of learning, that researchers could get a clearer view of the second language learning process. Thus, Error Analysis (EA), the study of learner language for the purpose of classifying errors and identifying their sources, emerged as the dominant SLA research.

While Contrastive Analysis was based only on the assumption that errors were all due to first language interference and were some how harmful to the learner's development, Error Analysis was based on the assumption that errors were a natural and healthy part of the language learning process- a natural "by –product" of the learners step by step discovery of the second language's rules through a process of trail and error. This process was called "Creative Construction".
Error Analysis (EA) should be explained in relationship with interlanguage because it is difficult to understand the construct of interlanguage without the background of Error Analysis. The definition of Error Analysis involves a set of procedure for identifying, describing, and explaining errors in learner language.(Ellis.R,1994). Error Analysis (EA) is the study and analysis of the errors made by second language learners. Error analysis may be carried out in order to (a.) identify strategies which learners use in language learning (b.) try to identify causes of learner errors (c.) obtain information on common difficulties in language learning, as an aid to teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials.(Richards,Jack C et al.1992).

2. The difference between Error Analysis and Contrastive Analysis :

EA became distinguished from CA by its examination of error attributable to all possible sources not just those which result from negative transfer of the native language.(Broun,Douglas B.1994. p.206).In the 1970s, Error Analysis supplanted Contrastive Analysis, which sought to predict the error that learners make by identifying the linguistic difference between their L1 and the target language. The underlying assumption of CA was that error

occurred primarily as a result of interference when the learner transferred native language 'habits' into the L2.Interference was believed to take place whenever the 'habits' of the native languages differed from those of the target language.CA gave way to EA as this assumption came to be challenged, whereas CA looked at only the learner's native language. EA provided a methodology for investigating learner language.(Ellis.R,1994.)
Learning a second language …constitutes a very different task from learning the first language. The basic problems arise not out of any essential difficulty in the features of the new language themselves but primarily out of the special "set" created by the first language habits. (Fries in Lado 1957)

Contrastive Analysis approaches to second language acquisition, based on a behaviourist approach to learning and a structural approach to language, could not satisfactorily explain how learners acquired a second language. Looking at learner language, or interlanguage, illuminated various aspects of the process of second language acquisition - for example, the role of the first language, the nature of learner errors, how learners acquire the grammar of a language. A systematic study of learner language in all its forms underpins much of the theory in second language research. Errors can also be discussed according to different perspectives - Contrastive Analysis, Transfer, and Variability. The last, variability in interlanguage, is a newer area of interest and arguably of great interest to teachers because it deals with issues of why learners sometimes 'get it right' and sometimes 'get it wrong'.

The term "interlanguage" was first introduced by the American linguist Larry Selinker. The latter assumed that the systematic development of learner language reflects a mental system of Second Language (L2) knowledge. Through interlanguage, we try to explain L2 acquisition by answering questions such as " what is the nature of the linguistic representation of the L2 that learners form ? "and " how do these representations change over time ? ».

Important to the understanding of the concept of " interlanguage" is behaviourist learning theory and mentalist views of language learning.

Behaviourist learning theory (1950's-1960's) accounts only for the observed behaviour, i.e. it controls the input to the learner and the learner's own 'output' and ignores what goes on between the two. It focused on "nurture".

The mentalist theory of learning: The main tenets or principles of the mentalist theory, famous in the 1960'sand 1970's , are :

1. Language learning is a uniquely human faculty; only human beings are capable of learning a language (not animals)
2. The human mind has the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) separate from other mental faculties responsible for other kinds of cognitive activity as logical reasoning.
3. This faculty is the primary determinant of language acquisition.
4. Input is needed, but only to "trigger" the operation of the LAD, it is the language speech that a child hears around (input).

The concept of "interlanguage" draws directly on these mentalist views of language acquisition.

3. What is an error?
In the field of methodology, there are two schools of thought as far as learner's errors are concerned. the first school believes that even if we achieve a perfect teaching. errors still will be committed because there would always be inadequacies of our teaching techniques. The second school; however, says that since we are living in an imperfect world, errors will always occur. As such then we must find techniques for dealing with errors after they have occurred.

A noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner *(Douglas Brown 1987).* A belief that the first language could hinder second language learning was reflected in the popularity of contrastive analysis. The more we know about the differences and similarities between languages, the better we would understand the causes of our learners' errors.

*We assume that the student who comes in contact with a foreign language will find some features of it quite easy and others extremely difficult. Those elements are similar to his native language will be simple for him and those elements that are different will be difficult. The teacher who has made a comparison of the foreign language with the native language of the students will know better what the real learning problems are and can better provide for teaching them. (*Lado 1957:2).

3.1.Errors Typology: There are a lot of classifications of "error" listed in the literature, here are some of the most referred ones:

a)Systematic vs non-systematic errors
According to S.Pit Corder (1981) there are two major kinds of errors :

Systmatic errors : Also known as error of competence. This kind of error seems to occur because of some ignorance of grammar rules. It is a systematic deviation made by learners who have not yet mastered the rules of the Second Langauge (L2). A learner cannot self-correct an error because it is reflective product of their current stage of L2 development. E.g : He can learns.

Non-systematic errors (mistakes): These are errors of performance, they are due to some psychological conditions as stress. anxiety. tiredness. slips of the tongue…etc. The learner can readily self-correct the mistakes. In error analysis there are three varieties of language a Source Language (L_S),a target language (LT) and an Approximative Language (L_A). A language usually involves the different steps we go through when learning a language. What has been proved to be important is that this (L_A) takes grammar from (L_T) and lexis from (L_S).

b) Another classification of errors :

1. **Transfer errors :** These are due to the learner's transfer of items from mother tongue. Negative transfer is the typical kind of errors.
   E.g1 : I have twenty years (In Arabic: انا عندي عشرين سنة), instead of saying I am twenty years; an instance of a negative transfer from Arabic (In French: J'ai 20 ans)
   E.g2: She gave me very interesting informations (In Arabic: اعطتني معلومات جد مهمة- In French: Elle ma donnait des informations trés important)
2. **Analogical errors :** These errors occur when we over-generalise in the application of rules. They have no connection with the nature of the mother tongue. They are inherent in the learning process (interlingual errors).E.g. He liked. He *goed* instead of he *went*.
3. **Induced errors :** These errors seem to be due to the methods and materials used in the teaching process. E.g. *as if =like*. She cries *as if* the baby cries instead of she cries *like* a baby.

c) Errors of competence versus errors of performance
Ellis (1994) and other writers distinguish between errors of competence and performance

- Competence errors may be :
Interlingual : coming from the differences between L1 and L2
Intralingual : Coming from within the language itself (developmental).

-Performance errors can arise: a. when learners have processing problems.
b. when learners use communication strategies because they lack sufficient knowledge of the language.
-Fossilisation
This refers to the relatively permanent incorporation into a learner's second language competence of incorrect linguistic forms (Selinker 1992).

Why does it happen?
- the learner does not have enough time to learn the target language
- the learner is under pressure to communicate
- there is a lack of desire to acculturate
- fossilisation is more common with older learners
- it depends on the kind of feedback the learner receives.

3.2.The importance of learner's errors: Errors are not negative things , they can be a strategy when learning second language. A learner's error is significant in three different ways. First to the teacher, in that they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and consequently, what remains for him to learn .Second, they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired and what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language. Thirdly, they are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn (Corder,1967).

3.3.The five stages of Error Analysis: Corder (1974) suggested 05 steps of error analysis
1. identification, 2. description, 3. explanation, 4. evaluation, 5. (prevention) all have problems associated with them.
Stages of error analysis :

- ✓ **1.Collection of a sample of learner language:** The first step involves collecting several samples of language use from a large number of learners in order to compile a comprehensive list of errors which represent the entire population
- ✓ **2.identifictaion of errors :** it depends on the analyst correct interpretation of the learner's intended meaning in the context. In other words , a learner may produce an utterance which is well formed but when taken in its context it is not acceptable at all.
- ✓ **3.Description of errors :** it is essentially a comparative process when the data being the erroneous sentence and the reconstructed sentence. It is argued that not a single instance of an error is to establish that this is a real one. In other words, when an error is occurring regularly It is a true error, while when it is committed only once it is mistake. It must be pointed out that it is on the basis of systematic errors that we construct syllabuses and remedial programs.
- ✓ **4.Explanation of errors :** the description of errors is a linguistic activity while the explanation of errors belongs to the field of psycholinguistic. It accounts for why and how errors come about.
- ✓ **5.Evaluation of errors:** The emphasis should be based on three basic categories: comprehensibility, seriousness and naturalness of the grammar and the lexis. Teachers who correct learners' errors have to keep in mind that there are two kinds of errors: global and local. Global error is the error which affects overall sentence organization (Her dog dangerous big), and local error is the error which affects single elements in a sentence (She has a interesting idea). A growing area of interest is in how we evaluate errors. Error Gravity studies explore the question of whether we evaluate errors on linguistic grounds, or whether we evaluate them on the content of the message.
- ✓ **Prevention** is not always included. These problems are comprehensively reviewed in the literature - and most teachers do not have time to carry out systematic and detailed error analyses. However, error correction does depend on some kind of error analysis if it is not to become a blind and haphazard process.

3.4. Feedback or correction
Correction has a certain negative connotation - many authors are suggesting alternative terms e.g. response, feedback etc. Some authors talk about incidental and systematic error correction. The former refers to correction of errors as they occur but no attention is paid to the underlying source or reason; the latter refers to a correction that tries to get the learner to generalise to other areas. Hammerly (1991) also uses this distinction in talking about 'surface' and 'deep' correction. Consider if the focus is on fluency or accuracy:

- Does drawing attention to errors have any effect?
- Equally others consider that error correction (not necessarily by the teacher) can help develop explicit knowledge - or it can cause the learner to notice features of the input which Ellis claims is vital: 'no noticing, no acquisition' (Ellis, 1995a)
- If error correction is effective, when should it be done?
- How should you respond to errors?

Some further points to remember:

a. there is a distinction between pointing out an error and correcting it. We know that processing is more effective the more effortful it is.
b. If you correct a student and (s) he repeats the correction, (s) he does not necessarily understand the correction.
c. Giving rules is fraught!! Think why
d. If students keep making the same errors, stop and reflect. Perhaps they are not yet ready for that language.
e. Not all errors are equally important. How are you to decide?

4.1.What is interlanguage?: Interlanguage is to be understood as follows :
The L2 learner constructs a linguistic system that draws, in fact, on the learner's First Language (L1) but is also different from it and also from the Target Language (TL). Hence, a learner's interlanguage is a unique linguistic system and it involves the following premises about L2 acquisition :

a.The learner constructs a system of abstract linguistic rules which underlies comprehension and production of the L2.This interlanguage a "mental grammar"(First the understanding of the input then the production of the output)
b.The learner's grammar is open to influence from the outside (the input) and from the inside (errors of overgeneralization, transfer, omission….). It is the learner who generates some aspects, for example, the negative transfer.
c.The learner's grammar is transitional ; he changes, adds and deletes rules ,and restructures the whole system. This results in an **"** interlanguage continuum**"** (from simple to complex).This mental grammar will gradually change and become more and more complex.(paint,paints,painted,painting,…).
d.Learners employ various learning strategies to develop their interlanguages. Different errors reflect different learning strategies. E.g: omission is a simplification strategy of the rules which are not yet mastered. Overgeneralization and transfer errors are evidence of strategy use.
e.The learner's grammar is likely to fossilize. Backsliding prevails. (i.e the production of errors representing an early stage of development). Fossilization is unique to L2 grammar, it does not occur in L1 acquisition.

Input → intake→ L2 knowledge → output
A computational model of L2 acquisition

4.2. Principles of interlanguage: Interlanguage or learners' language is often referred to as the "interlanguage continuum" because the learner moves from zero knowledge of the TL along a 'road' to greater proficiency and mastery of the TL. Either "**recreation**" or "**restructuring**", a compromise position is to think of the process as involving both - perhaps for phonology and lexis a "restructuring" takes place and for syntax " recreation". Dulay and Burt (1973): **creative construction theory.** If you consider that what happens is "restructuring" then you would expect learners to learn a language in different ways depending on their mother tongue - certainly the influence of the mother tongue would be very evident as learners tried to fit the 'new' with the 'old'. If, however, you take a "recreation" stance, then all learners start from zero base and we would expect them to more or less follow the same path, making the same errors, etc. Some would claim that indeed this happens with syntax.

Ellis (1992) summarises three major features of interlanguage**:**

1 It is permeable
2 It is systematic yet variable
3 It is dynamic

In addition we can say learners pass through a number of stages in acquiring the Target Language. Each stage can be considered a Transitional Competence. Interlanguage systems can fossilise

4.3. Influence of the mother tongue/other languages – transfer or cross linguistic influence

Early research into the influence of the mother tongue was part of ***Contrastive analysis*** which was the systematic comparison of specific linguistic characteristics or two or more languages – among its aims :

- predicting and explaining the problems L2 learners have i.e. predictive AND diagnostic
- helping teachers develop appropriate course materials which take into account the learners' mother tongue e.g. The Crescent Course for the Arab World which paid particular attention in the early stages to the Roman Alphabet.

Theoretical basis partly depended on behaviourism – once this became discredited then knock-on effect on tenets of contrastive analysis. Also looking at learner language revealed many errors were not due to the influence or first/other languages . e.g. from Dulay and Burt (1974)

'…universal cognitive mechanisms are the basis for the child's organisation of a target language and that it is the target language rather than the L1 (native) language that guides the acquisition process.'

Now resurgence of interest in influence of mother tongue:
- the role of universal developmental sequences does not rule out a role for transfer
- transfer does not HAVE to be linked to behaviourism
- emphasis in CA was on morphology and syntax. What about pronunciation, lexis and discourse?

4.4. Positive and Negative Transfer

Odlin (1989) gave this definition: Transfer is the influence resulting from similarities and differences between the target language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired.

Positive transfer – where the first/other language helps you in some way with the target language. The similarities, for example, in lexis may enable you to more easily acquire the lexis of the target language.

Negative transfer (previously referred to as interference) – where the first/other language causes you to make an error.
This may be through:

- underproduction or avoidance
- overuse of a structure/lexis etc.
- errors in speech and writing – called production errors e.g. literal translation; or using a particular politeness strategy
- misinterpretations – where the mother tongue guides how you interpret the target language

This is the classification used by Odlin but it is not entirely a satisfactory description. Perhaps easier to concentrate on the linguistic areas in which transfer, both negative and positive occurs.

Effects of transfer – areas in which it happens
1 Discourse
2 Syntax e.g. relative clauses
3 Phonology – a very strong negative transfer usually
4 Lexis

Transfer can be a very useful strategy to overcome problems in communication – you can make up for gaps in your knowledge by borrowing from your mother tongue and hoping… You can use discourse patterns that exist in your own language to for example try to persuade somebody .

4.5. Variation in Interlingauge

Tarone is the most notable writer in this area. Ellis and Gass and Selinker give comprehensive and good overviews.
5.1 Diachronic (or vertical) variation
5.2 Synchronic (or horizontal) variation

Most distinguish between *synchronic* variation and *diachronic* variation. The former refers to variation at any one point in time whilst the latter refers to variation over time - hence developmental.

Ellis distinguishes between inter - and intra- learner variation.

The quote below is from Tarone (1988) who has written extensively on the subject of variability:

> *Systematic interlanguage variation occurs when a learner produces different variants of a particular IL form either in varying linguistic environments, or under different social conditions with different interlocutors or in different physical locations.*

One important feature of interlanguage is that the learners' internal representation of
a language changes as they progress. In other words – it varies. The variation that we are concerned with is systematic – that is, we can see a pattern to the variation.

Sometimes this variation is over time – *diachronic* variation (from the Greek 'through time'). But sometimes learners vary in their language use at any ONE time – called *synchronic* variation (from the Greek meaning 'in the same time-period'). This can make it difficult to decide whether learners have/have not acquired a particular structure. For example, they may 'get it right' when they are writing an essay, but then they may 'get it wrong' when they talk to you about what they have written. Synchronic variation is of great importance to teachers because it explains why learners make errors in some instances and not in others.

4.5.1. An example of variability in interlanguage use: *Based on: Tarone (1985)*
This was a full scale study of variation in learners' grammatical accuracy at the level of syntax and morphology. Twenty second-language learners (adults) at the University of Minnesota took part – 10 native speakers of Japanese and 10 native speakers of Arabic .The research looked at the production of four target language forms:

1. third person singular present tense –s;
2. the articles a/an and the;
3. the noun plural –s;
4. and third person singular direct object pronouns.

This task only considers the results for the articles (2).

The learners were asked to:

i. Undertake a written 'grammaticality' judgement task. This had a number of English sentences with missing articles. Subjects marked any sentence which they thought was grammatically incorrect and then they had to rewrite the erroneous part.

Participate in an oral interview with a native speaker of English. This dealt with the subject's field of study, plans for the future etc.

iii. Undertake an oral narration task. The subjects looked at a series of events shown on a video screen with no sound. Then they told the story of the video clips to a non native listener who had to select a sequence of pictures to match the story. If they told it correctly, the listener was able to select the correct sequence of pictures. The Japanese and Arabic speakers were paired and took turns to do the task.

Tarone points out that the tasks can be ordered not only in terms of decreasing amount of attention to grammatical form; but also according to:
a) the connectness of the discourse
b) the communicative pressure placed upon the speaker to transmit information clearly.

Tarone did find that learners achieved most grammatical accuracy with some forms – e.g. the third person singular –s ending, when they carried out tasks which seemed to require more attention to form but as you have seen this did not occur with articles.
You will find Tarone's explanation below – how similar is it to your answer?

Tarone's (1985) conclusions

> *What we are arguing here is that these learners used articles and direct object pronouns most accurately in the narrative because they realised (possibly unconsciously) that these features have an important function in maintaining a clear story line. It may be that articles and direct object pronouns were supplied least often in the grammar test because cohesive ties are not required within a set of unconnected sentences; as the oral tasks required increasingly cohesive texts to be produced by the subjects and applied increasing communicative pressure, the subjects increasingly supplied these two forms in obligatory contexts.*
> and
>
> *If indeed this explanation can account for the differential pattern of variable grammatical accuracy found between third person markers on the one hand and the direct object pronoun on the other hand, we must then conclude that the variable production of these learners was governed not by attention paid equally to all language forms, but to some degree by the nature of the discourse which the tasks required, and the sort of grammatical forms required by the discourse. As tasks elicit discourse which is increasingly cohesive and/or they apply increasing communicative pressure upon the speaker, some grammatical forms may improve in accuracy rate while others may decrease in accuracy.*

4.6.The limitation of Error Analysis: By focusing only on errors, researchers were denied access to the whole picture of SLA. They studied what went wrong with learners but not what made them successful. Moreover, it was often impossible or very difficult in best situations to identify the unitary source of an error. Other critiques of EA is : a. An overstressing of production data b. Fail to account for the strategy of avoidance c. too closely focused on specific language rather than viewing universal aspects of language.

5.Conclusion:

This article tried to shed light on some concepts in the field of SLA and FLA such as errors analysis ,contrastive analysis ,interlanguage and variability. It has been clearly explained that errors are not seen only as the unfortunate result of 'interference' as the Audio-linguists thought but seen as inevitable and necessary part of language development, that teachers could use as well as 'deal with.' Learners were now thought to use L1 knowledge as a positive learning strategy until the features that they used were sufficiently 'disconfirmed' by feedback or by 'noticing.' Some authors talk: about incidental and systematic error correction. The former refers to correction of errors as they occur but no attention is paid to the underlying source or reason; the latter refers to a correction that tries to get the learner to generalise to other areas. Error Gravity studies explore the question of whether we evaluate errors on linguistic grounds, or whether we evaluate them for their effect on successfully communicating the content of the message.

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