

CHAPTER THREE

ERROR ANALYSIS

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I intend to present the error analysis approach, which is the basis of my study. First, I shall refer to its roots and development. Then, I shall show the distinction between mistakes and errors. Finally, I shall deal with the procedures followed in Error Analysis method and how they can be appropriately used in my study.

III. 1. Error Analysis: its roots and development

Freeman and Long (1991) claim that the study of language acquisition can be said to have passed through a series of phases defined by the modes of inquiry researchers have utilized in their work: contrastive analysis, error analysis, performance analysis and discourse analysis . (p.8)

As we look into the roots and development of error analysis, we first have to overview contrastive analysis so as to get better insights into how error analysis became more popular among researchers.

III.1.1. Contrastive Analysis

Recognition of the importance of the learners' native language in the learning of a new language has led to the development of the field of research known as contrastive analysis (CA). A common definition of this approach is that it is a branch of linguistics which aims at contrasting the structures of two languages to find out differences and use them as an input for the prediction of errors. In other words, contrastive analysis is devoted to comparing the mother tongue and the target language to predict and explain the errors made by learners. Before the second language acquisition field as we know it today

was established from the 1950s to the 1960s, contrastive analyses were conducted in which two languages were systematically compared. Researchers at that time were motivated by the prospect of being able to identify points of similarity and difference between native languages and target languages. There was a strong belief that a more effective pedagogy would result when these were taken into consideration. Charles Fries (1945), one of the leading applied linguists, asserts :

“ The most efficient materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learners”. (p.9)

As stated above, contrastive analysis is devoted to comparing the mother tongue and the target language to predict and explain the errors made by learners of any particular background. Two versions are suggested to do so: the predictive version seen as the strong hypothesis, and the explanatory version called the weak version.

III.1.1.2. The Predictive Version

The predictive version tends to contrast the systems of two languages with the aim to pinpoint the differences between the two systems; the differences are considered as a source of difficulty for second or foreign learners. Lado (1957), an early proponent of this version claims : *“ Those elements that are similar to his native language will be easy, and those elements that are different will be difficult. (p. 2)*

This conviction that linguistic differences could be used to predict learning difficulty produced the notion of contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH). The concept of transfer constitutes the core of this hypothesis as Lado (ibid) points out:

“ Individuals tend to transfer the forms and meanings, and the distribution of forms and meanings of their native language and culture to foreign language and culture- both productively when attempting to speak the language and to act in the culture, and respectively when attempting to grasp and understand the language and culture as practiced by natives”.

(p.2.)

Larsen- Freeman (1991) also asserts:“ *Where two languages were similar, positive transfer would occur; where they were different, negative transfer or interference would result.* (p.57)

This supposes that similarities do not cause difficulty. However, Nickel (1971) claims that because a particular feature of the target language is different from the mother tongue does not necessarily follow that it is difficult to learn (...) Indeed there is evidence that something totally new or different may prove easier to master than something which is slightly different. For example, “ *where a similar sound exists in the two languages but in different environment, there may be a greater learning problem than the case of a totally new sound*” (cited in Corder, 1974, p. 230).

Not only phonology is concerned but also other aspects of the language such as the graphemic representation of ‘ p’ which is generally replaced by our learners by ‘b’; they usually say ‘ broblem’ instead of ‘ problem’, especially those who have not mastered French.

In the context of foreign language learning, the individual already possesses knowledge of his mother tongue, and it is this which he tends to transfer. Several types of transfer can be distinguished according to both its direction and its effects. Van Els et al (1984) observe that transfer can be either ‘**retro-active**’ or ‘**pro-active**’. Pro-active transfer is the transfer of existing skills onto new skills and retro-active transfer is transfer of new skills onto existing skills. In my case, I am interested by pro-active transfer in that learners tend to transfer rules of their native language to the target language, especially beginners (p. 49).

I.1. 1.2. The Explanatory Version

While the predictive version (strong version) is too ambitious and too theoretical as it deals with all aspects of the two languages, the explanatory version (weak version) is limited to the mother tongue interference to start with to explain the similarities and the differences between the two systems. The starting point in the contrast is provided by actual translation, learning difficulties, residual foreign accent...Reference is made only to explain such observed phenomena. Wilking (1972) supports this claim by asserting that prediction is an extraordinarily difficult thing. He attached greater importance to the actual performance of the learner by saying that “ *It seems more sensible to make errors the starting point for a contrastive analysis and not just a way of verifying hypothetical predictions*”. Contrastive analysis should be carried out to provide a linguistic explanation for known errors, rather than as a predictive procedure (p.202). The explanatory version is, then, more practical as it works in close relation with the teacher.

Hence, it seems that the explanatory version is more appropriate to studies concerning error analysis, including mine, for it will shed light on some areas of the native language interference as well as the second language interference (French) in my case. Nevertheless, contrastive analysis in its strong version was abandoned in favour of error analysis for it was shown unable to predict the occurrence of a number of actual errors.

III.2. The Error Analysis Approach

As stated above, contrastive analysis deals with the prediction of sources of difficulties, or areas of interference by contrasting the native language and the target language, whereas error analysis (E A) is concerned with the taxonomy and the explanation of observed errors. EA is comparative, as explained by Corder, in the sense that it attempts to compare the learner's form of language at any particular point in his learning career with the target language (p.149). According to Richards et al (1992), this methodology for investigating the learner's language has three main goals: *to identify the strategies which learners use in language learning, to identify the causes of learners' errors and to obtain information on common difficulties in language learning as an aid to teaching or in the preparation of teaching materials* (p.127). This clearly shows that research is guided by two major objectives: one purely theoretical, concerned with the psychological aspect of learning language; and the other practical and significant to language teachers (Corder, 1975, p.205). Accordingly, Developmental Error Analysis is distinguished from Remedial Error Analysis.

III.2.1. Developmental Error Analysis

The analysis of learners' errors have contributed greatly to second language research (SLR), as its main concern was with the development stages in language learning. Within the framework of EA, the learner is viewed to construct a grammar through the hypotheses he formulates and revises each time. Several terms have been suggested such as 'transitional competence and idiosyncratic dialect' (Corder, 1981), 'approximative system' (Nemser, 1974) and 'interlanguage' (Selinker, 1972). Developmental EA's aim is to shed light on the successive stages in interlanguage development to better understand the universal features of second and foreign language learning processes and strategies.

Error analysts assume that identical processes involved in learning the mother tongue are also involved in learning a second or foreign language. Corder (1975) asserts: “ *I propose therefore as a working hypothesis that some at least of the strategies adopted by the learners of a second language are substantially the same as those by which a first language is acquired*”. (p.8)

In this respect, he rejected the idea that errors are termed 'deviant' and suggested the term 'idiosyncratic' instead, in that the strategies used by a second language learner are similar to those used in acquiring the first language, during which hypotheses are tested again and again until he reaches an acceptable one.

III.2.2. Remedial Error Analysis

In addition to research on the nature of interlanguage and the mechanism responsible for error production, Remedial Error Analysis is considered as the pedagogical facet of the hypothesis in that it enables the teacher to opt for innovation, relying on EA findings, seeking better teaching. Corder (1981) explains that errors are of great significance in that valuable insights can be obtained from the description of actual errors which present false hypotheses about the TL, and on which remediation can be achieved. Therefore, material classroom procedures can be improved.(p.25)

My aim in this research is not to offer a new perspective in foreign language learning, but a mere attempt to identify the learners' difficulties in the English Department at Biskra University, and accordingly, to suggest an appropriate therapeutic treatment of what is problematic in a specific linguistic sphere.

Before moving to the error analysis approach as an approach to study errors, we find it useful to make a clear distinction between mistakes and errors, which are usually confusing terms, or which taken as interchangeable.

III.2.2.1. Definition of Mistakes

At this point some definitions are in order. H. D. Brown (1994) offers the following definition “ *A mistake is a performance error, that is rather a random guess or a ‘slip’ in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly*”. (p.205). According to this definition, a native speaker could make a mistake in his language.

III.2.2.2. Definition of Errors

Errors, on the other hand, are problems that a native speaker would not do. Corder (1974) refers to errors as: “*breaches of the code*” or “*deviations*” from what is regarded as the norms”. (p.250).

Brown (ibid) defines an error as “*a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker, reflecting the interlanguage competence of the learner*”. Recognizing that an error has been committed necessarily involves the interpretation of the learner’s utterance in a context. Corder (ibid) maintains that the utterance may be “erroneous” in two ways: “*Overtly or covertly. These relate to Surface Structure and Deep Structure respectively*” (p.272). Overt errors, he explains are superficially deviant. i.e., ungrammatical in terms of the target language rules. Covert errors, on the other hand, are superficially well-formed, but inappropriate in the context.

The key term of the definition given above is “interlanguage” as proposed by Selinker (1972). As someone learns a foreign language, the errors he makes indicate his level of proficiency. Clearly, the errors of a beginner are different from the errors of an advanced student and what were once errors can become mistakes or lapses. A simple definition which should be kept in mind is that a slip is what a learner can self-correct, and an error is what a learner cannot self-correct. Richard distinguishes between ‘**Developmental**’ and ‘**Intralingual**’ errors. The former refers to the different stages the learner passes through in building hypotheses and reformulating them until he reaches, to a certain extent, a language similar to that of the native speaker. The latter reflects the general characteristics of rule learning such as faulty generalization, incomplete application of the rules, and failure to learn the conditions under which rules apply.

Hence, the difference between native speakers and foreign language learners as regards errors is believed to derive from competence. Foreign language learners commit errors largely because of the paucity of their knowledge of the target language, whereas deviant forms produced by native speakers are dismissed as slips of the tongue or slips of the pen. That is, they originate not from deficient competence but from performance phenomena such as changes of plan, tiredness, stress and others. The definition of these terms: competence and performance is therefore necessary.

III.2.2.3. Definition of Competence

Competence as defined by David Crystal (1992) is:

“ A person’s unconscious knowledge of his/her language – specifically, of the system of rules which has been mastered, enabling the person to produce and understand an indefinite number of sentences, and to recognize grammatical mistakes and ambiguities”.

(p.17)

However, if a person has not attained an acceptable level of competence, that is to say a good command of language, his ability to communicate either orally or in a written form will be hindered.

III.2.2.4. Definition of Performance

The notion of competence contrasts with the notion of performance which is seen by Chomsky as “ *the actual realization of language*”, it is also analogous to the Saussurean concept of ‘parole’. Performance is affected by such features as hesitation, tiredness, stress and other psychological constraints as well as social ones. Thus errors of performance are unsystematic and not very serious as they can be corrected. On the contrary,

errors of competence are persistent and systematic and in consequence serious and their treatment calls for careful analysis to discover their causes.

We can , thus, say that errors produced by our learners in their written productions are due to deficiency in their linguistic competence in the target language. This does not mean that they are completely incompetent but that the lack of mastery of the grammatical rules of English hinders communication, and constitutes an obstacle for these learners, most of whom will in their turn be teachers in the near future.

III. 3. The Error Analysis Procedure

In order to proceed to error analysis, three stages are to be followed (.Allen and Corder, 1974, pp.126-128):

- Recognition
- Description
- Explanation
-

Van Els et al (1984) proposed the same steps , in addition to:

- Evaluation of errors
- Prevention / Correction of errors

The first three stages are logically dependent on each other in that we cannot describe errors without recognizing that a sentence is classified as erroneous, and ultimately trying to supply an appropriate explanation.

The teacher has to be sure in recognizing a sentence as being erroneous; his assertion should rely on correct interpretation of the learner's intentions. After

recognition, description follows based on a grammar which aims to relate the meaning to its surface structure through a set of explicit rules. Explanation of errors is the last step in which errors can be explained as a linguistic problem in the sense that it shows how the learner has deviated from the rules of the target language, or, a psychological problem, showing the reasons why the learners make such deviations.

III.3.1. Recognition of Errors

The recognition of errors is not as simple as it seems to be, for a sentence may be superficially well-formed but done only by chance, or not appropriate to the context. After the recognition of errors, if we try to be descriptive, we will label an erroneous sentence as ‘overtly idiosyncratic’(superficially deviant, not native-like). If we are prescriptive, we will label it ungrammatical in terms of the structure of the target language.

III.3.2. Description of Errors

Returning to a sentence we have judged to be erroneous, the first step is to ask “Is the learner’s sentence intelligible?”, i.e., can we work out what he intended to mean? We can arrive at an authoritative interpretation, and hence to an authoritative reconstruction of the utterance with the help of the learner, in case he is present; otherwise, we shall proceed to a plausible interpretation and a plausible reconstruction based on the teacher’s capacity to infer meaning intended by the learner from his production.

This process consists of comparing original sentences with their plausible and authoritative constructions, and identifying differences. A number of different categories of idiosyncracies have been identified. According to Corder

(1973): “ *Difference of this sort can be classified into four categories: omission of some required element; addition of some unnecessary or incorrect elements; selection of an incorrect element; and misordering of elements*”

(p.277)

	Phonological/Orthographic	Grammatical	Lexical
Omission			
Addition			
Selection			
Ordering			

Table 01: Matrix for Classification of errors

Source: Corder, 1973, p.272)

III.3.2.1. Omission

Certain linguistic forms may be omitted because of their complexity. In pronunciation consonant clusters often create problems and some of their constituents are left unpronounced. This also occurs in morphology. Learners often leave out the third person singular morpheme - s, the plural marker- s, and the past tense inflection- ed. In syntax, learners may omit certain elements which are obligatory. This can be illustrated by some examples from the corpus:

“It is an instrument which is used humans”

“ ...because the words complex and very difficult...”

“Speech is oral means of communication...”

“ There are many language in this world, but famous language is English

“ It divided into three parts...”

“ ..., he pleased so much because he wait me for a long time”

“ There are many people dream...”

III.3.2.2. Addition

Learners also add elements. In phonology, a frequent phoneme is epenthesis which consists of adding a vowel, for instance a Luba speaker of French often say aradio, eretard instead of radio and retard (Forum, July, 1995) respectively they add vowels to make the foreign word fit the first language pattern.

In morphology students often overuse the third person singular morpheme's' At the syntactic level learners may use the definite article with a place name like ‘ the Algiers’. At the lexical level the learner may add an unnecessary word e.g., I stayed there during five years ago. The following examples can be used as illustration:

“The speech is a group of the sounds...”

“ a speech is sound...”

“ In the writing we use some letters”

“ Speech it is a way of communication between the human...”

“the causes of pollution are: the factories are near for the house of people”

“The English is the door of civilization...”

“ so we must be study this event...”

“ I consider it that it is the means of expression...”

III.3.2.3. Selection

Learners commit errors in pronunciation, morphology, syntax, and vocabulary due to the selection of the wrong phoneme, morpheme, structure or vocabulary item. At the phonological level this may be characterized by interlingual transfer, the learner substituting a familiar phoneme from the mother tongue, like Arabic students who substitute ‘p’ with ‘b’ , like saying ‘broblem’ instead of ‘problem’. An error in morphology can be committed , like the selection of ‘est’ instead of ‘er’, but they are less frequent as errors in other spheres. In syntax the learner may select a wrong structure. At the lexical level , he often selects words which do not convey the meaning. Some examples selected from the students’ exams will be given to show this :

“...when the immigrants leave in abroad countries...”

“ ...factories are trought its rubbish...”

“ to avoid these problem...”

“ this sounds goes up and down...”

“ ... this organs which in the end produced speech”

“ I was surprised by my succeed”

“ you can saw...”

“ I can watched...”

“ the demographic explosion which need many houses, but for the account of agriculture lands in the aim to build a houses”

“ to avoid these problem we must make people awar for these phenomena”

“ ...and this comes for of the problems which face them”

Some of the examples used as illustration may be classified in more than one category. i.e., they sometimes overlap.

III.3.2.4. Ordering

Misordering may occur in pronunciation by shifting the position of certain phonemes, e.g., a speaker may say fignisicant instead of significant. Less frequent at the morphological level, but in the example: He's get upping now, the learner attaches the inflection 'ing' to the particle of the two word verb get up. At the syntactic level, misordering is much more common as in the sentence: "He's a dear to me friend", where the constituents of a single noun phrase are inversed. At the lexical level, the learner may reverse the elements of a compound noun word. A *car key* may become a *key car*, which may be regarded as a car carrying keys. In this category also, some errors have been selected:

"English is the best language international"

"The life easy in abroad make them immigrate"

What is evident is that students find difficulty in many grammatical areas, particularly in the use of articles and prepositions which are used randomly. Besides, errors in tenses are noticeable

III.3.3. Explanation of Errors

Explanation is a far more difficult task. To realize that an error has occurred and to specify the forms which express it is a simpler enterprise than hypothesizing about the processes in the learner's mind which have caused the errors to occur. In other words, providing a psycholinguistic explanation to error production. The role that the explanation of learners' idiosyncracies plays in deepening insights about the process of second language acquisition

at large is of paramount importance. It is important to point out that determining the sources of errors is still speculative.

II.3.3.1. Causes of Errors

Until recently, theorists and methodologists seemed chiefly concerned with who should accept responsibility, some regarding students as mainly responsible, others the teacher. However, much truth there may be on either sides, we must agree that even the most intelligent, conscientious and motivated students do make errors, even when learning under the best possible conditions. It is much more fruitful to analyse the causes of these errors and to apply the knowledge we have gained to the teaching process.

Corder (1974) claims that there are three major causes of errors, which he labels “**transfer errors**”, “ **analogical errors**” and “ **teaching induced errors**” (p.275) :

III.3.3.1 Transfer Errors

These kinds of errors are considered as dependent in that they reflect the effect of first language on second or foreign language learning. In this case, errors are referred to as ‘interlingual errors’ (Selinker, 1972), and ‘transfer errors’ (Corder 1974b), they are cross-linguistic in nature, and contrast with intralingual errors.

III.3.3.1.2 Analogical Errors

Analogical errors, also referred to as “overgeneralization” is another cause, which simply means an incomplete knowledge of the target language.

They relate to the structure of the second or foreign language and the learning process: they are labelled ‘intralingual errors’ (Richards 1974), seen as independent ones. Certain aspects of English, for example, the ‘s’ in the third person singular present tense are difficult for all students, no matter what their native language is. Spelling is also problematic for non-native speakers of English. Finally, fossilization occurs when an individual reaches a satisfactory level of competence in the target language and does not worry about persistent errors he/she makes, and which may not inhibit communication.

Richards (1974), in his “Non-Contrastive Approach to Errors”, puts much emphasis on intralingual errors, , originating within the structure of the target language itself. The complexity of some of its features engenders certain learning problems in which all learners, regardless of their background language, tend to make similar errors. First, they can be caused by ‘transfer of training’ (Selinker, 1974, p.39), also called ‘teaching induced errors’ (Corder, 1974b, p.131). These errors are assigned to the teaching methodology and the materials used; i.e., they relate to the input received either due to its wrong presentation or its sequencing. Second, communication-based errors may result from the learners’ ignorance and resistance to use certain features of the target language because they do not inhibit communication. Therefore, fossilization occurs, as a result of acquiring a satisfactory level of competence. Third , errors can be ascribed to strategies of second language learning, for example, the learner’s tendency of simplification.

These errors have been classified into four types:

- **Overgeneralization**
- **Ignorance of rule restriction**
- **Incomplete application of rules**
- **False concepts hypothesized:**

III.3.3.1.3. Teaching-induced errors

These kinds of errors may be due to the teaching materials or methods . Having related mentalism to overgeneralization, we can relate behaviourism to those errors which appear to be induced by the teaching process itself. To behaviourists, error is evidence of failure, of ineffective teaching, or lack of control. If materials are well chosen, graded and presented with meticulous care, there should never be any error. This can be acceptable in the early stages of language learning when controls are applied in the shape of substitution tables, conversion exercises of a mechanical nature guided sentence patterns, but more difficult at later stages. Unfortunately, these errors are much more difficult to classify, and Corder (op.cit) admits this:

- I'm go to school everyday. (overuse of the present simple if a structural syllabus has great emphasis on one tense).

III.3.4. Evaluation of Errors

Error Analysis is not restricted to the description and explanation of errors, but the assessment of the seriousness of certain inaccuracy, depending on its kind and frequency, is necessary. Corder (1975) suggested two types of criteria: the linguistic and the communicative (p.206-7).

The linguistic is concerned with the number and nature of the rules transgressed, the classification of errors as syntactic or morphological and the distinction of errors as global or local.

The communicative approach assesses the seriousness of errors in terms of the fluency of communication. It is argued that global errors impede communication , while local errors do not.

III.3.4.1 Global / Local errors

People with teaching experience have certainly encountered situations where they have difficulty locating the exact error committed by a student in an essay. Teachers often end up covering a whole sentence or paragraph with red marks. This phenomenon implies that an error is not always something which can be easily spotted. An error can vary in magnitude. It can cover a phoneme, a morpheme, a word, a phrase, a clause, a sentence or even a paragraph. This state of affair prompted Burt and Kiparsky (1974: 73) to distinguish between global and local error. A global error is one which involves “ *the overall structure of a sentence*” and a local error is one which affects “ *a particular constituent*”. Richards, et al. (1985: 123) give the following examples of global and local error:

Global error: “ *I like a taxi, but my friend said so not that we should be late to school*”.

Local error: “ *If I heard from him, I will let you know.*”

The first one is marked as erroneous while in the second only “heard” would be marked as erroneous.

It should be pointed out that errors have variable effect on intelligibility. For instance, the following pairs given by Richards et al (1985 : 96):

- “*Since the harvest was good, was rain a lot last year*”
- “*The harvest was good last year, because plenty of rain*”

In spite of its ungrammaticality, the second sentence makes sense. However, the reader is unable to tell whether the first one is a question or an answer.

The communicative approach has consequently altered the way we deal with and react to errors. According to David Cross (1992), in real life we rarely react to local errors-those which do not interfere with comprehension of the message, but we do react to ‘ global’ errors - those which impede comprehension of the message, simply because of communication gaps. If we are engaged in activities aimed at developing fluency, we may choose not to respond to specific errors at all, at least immediately.

If, on the other hand, we are engaged in activities aimed at improving accuracy, we may consider it important to respond to incorrect forms. A simple nod, facial expression, gesture, or repetition with a rising intonation is often sufficient indication of an incorrect form.

III.3.5. Correction of errors

Van Els et al define correction as “*feedback on errors*” (p.261); Edge says that when we teachers decide to correct our students, “ *we have to be sure that we are using correction positively to support learning*”. Probably all foreign language teachers would agree with Edge’s comment, but they would not necessarily agree on how we should correct errors our students make.

We can see a gradual shift in classroom practice, from the immediate correction of every error in older methods based on behavioural theories of learning (e.g. audio-lingualism) to a more tolerant modern approach. Yet error correction remains one of the most contentious and misunderstood issues in the second and foreign language teaching profession.

Recent theory on language acquisition and teaching methodology supports the position that not all errors should be corrected, and those that are corrected should usually not be treated immediately. This position is based on the fact that errors are normal and unavoidable during the process. Also, current theories of how we learn languages recognize that habit formation is only part of the process.

Most teachers , today, no longer automatically correct students, instead, they encourage self-correction and peer correction which involves all the learners in the correction of errors. However, many students still expect, even request, the teacher to correct all their errors.

CONCLUSION

The systematic analysis of the students' errors can be of great value to all concerned, i.e., the teacher, the student, and the researcher. Corder (1981) explains that such deviations are significant 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*” (p.11). In fact, they can offer the teacher a clear and reliable picture of his students' knowledge of the language in the light of which he can plan and arrange what remains to be taught until the final goal is reached, which is mastery and fluency in the target language.

The student, by having his errors pointed out to him, will, with diligence and reasonably conscious effort, manage to correct them. In the process of correction, he will be trained to use his powers of reasoning, and with guidance he will be able to reformulate new hypotheses and adopt new learning strategies, more with the nature of the target language.

Taking into consideration our learners' socio-cultural background, I shall rely on my knowledge of Arabic and French, which will undoubtedly help me to explain some errors, i.e., to use the explanatory version to account for examples of interference. My study will not be limited to the mother tongue interference, but I shall try to tackle intralingual errors also.

