

INTRODUCTION

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I. AIMS OF THE STUDY

Researchers are interested in errors made by ESL and EFL learners because they are believed to contain valuable information on the strategies that people use to acquire a language. (Richards, 1974). In 1994, Gass and Selinker defined errors as ‘ red flags’ that provide evidence of learner’s knowledge of the second language. Hence, it is through error analysis that the teacher assesses learning and teaching and determines the priorities for future efforts.

As a teacher of English for many years, and having taught all the levels from 8 AF pupils to first- year university students, I am well aware of the fact that learners make a lot of errors in English and mainly in grammar. This represents an aspect of learners’ linguistic incompetence, in other words, they have not attained a linguistic level which allows them to manipulate the language easily. Thus, I have decided to conduct an error analysis of first-year students errors at the department of English at Biskra University in order to know the sources of these errors and the reasons behind their continued occurrence. As I said above, the need for such a study is supported by the great number of errors made by learners in grammar. This is not limited to the topic of ‘grammar’, but this concerns all the topics that require learners’ ability such as: written expression, literature, civilisation, and psychology. One can argue that the thing to focus on is the content of the message to be communicated regardless of errors . However, the value of grammar is undeniable since the meaning may be greatly affected by the fact of making errors. This is supported by Habermas (1979) who asserts that “Communicative competence involves

communicating in accordance with that fundamental system of rules that adult subjects master to the extent that they can fulfil the conditions for a happy employment of sentences in utterances” (in Abi Samra, 2003). This shows that the value of the message depends not only on its appropriateness, but also on its correctness. Thus, to attain an acceptable level of accuracy, students need to be provided with appropriate tools to achieve such a level of proficiency.

Another factor is that the ‘licence’ (B.A degree) delivered at the end of the fourth year is “ teaching oriented”, which means that most graduates will be recruited as teachers in middle or secondary education. In other words, if the problem of making errors persists, these future teachers will make the situation worse.

My study is, then, intended the teachers’ attention on the situation of our learners, and to attempt to find reasons for such a situation in order to determine the areas that need remedy. I share the same view as Corder (1974) who claims that “*systematically analysing errors made by language learners makes it possible to determine areas that need reinforcement in teaching*”. This might shed light on obscure areas in the process of learning, which, if treated adequately, would lead to better learning.

II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Since error analysis in grammar serves as an effective way to improve writing proficiency, in order to make English teaching more efficient in our department, I have decided to analyse the grammatical errors that constantly occur in the English compositions of first-year students. More specifically, the current study will address the following questions:

- 1- What are the most common and recurrent grammatical errors made by these learners, revealing their linguistic competence?
- I. Are these errors due to interlingual interference or to intralingual interference?

III. HYPOTHESIS

It is hypothesised that a large proportion of the grammatical errors made by learners is caused by negative transfer, or native language interference, another part is due to intralingual interference, other factors play a minor role and will not be the concern of my present study. I believe that having a clearer perception of students' errors would be of great help to teachers who might adopt other strategies in teaching grammar, and opt for a remedial work to improve writing proficiency.

IV. DEFINITION OF TERMS

I find it necessary to define a few terms that will be used in this study for two main reasons, first because they constitute the core of my research, second they are intended to avoid any kind of ambiguity for the reader.

- **Interlingual/Transfer errors** are those attributed to the native language (NL). Interlingual errors occur when the learner's habits (patterns, systems or rules) interfere or prevent him/her, to some extent, from acquiring the patterns and rules of the second language (Corder, 1971).

- **Interference (negative transfer)** is the negative influence of the mother tongue (L1) on the performance of the target language (L2) , (Lado, 1964).
- **Intralingual/Developmental errors** are those due to the language being learned (TL), independent of the native language. According to Richards (1970), “they are items produced by the learner which reflects not the structure of the mother tongue, but generalizations based on partial exposure to the target language .The learner, in this case, tries to “ derive the rules behind the data to which he /she has been exposed, and may develop hypotheses that correspond neither to the native language nor to the target language” (Richards, 1970, p.6). In general terms, they refer to the deviations from the norms of the target language which “derive from the strategies employed by the learner in language acquisition and the mutual interference of items within the target language” (Richards,1974, p. 182). Richards (ibid) proposed four major strategies for language deviations:
 - **Overgeneralization**, one of the strategies used by learners, which consists in applying a rule which has been learned beyond the extent to which it applies. Many examples can be given in support of generalization, Littlewood (1984) cites the example of forming plural (p.24), by adding ‘s’ to even irregular plurals, also generalizing the use ‘ed’ past form.
 - **Ignorance of rule restriction:** to apply the rule to contexts where they do not apply (ibid). These errors are explicable in terms of analogy or rote learning.Incomplete application of the rule: Richards (ibid) “ *Failure to learn the more complex types of structure because*

the learner finds he can achieve communication by using relatively simple rules” (p.37).

- **Incomplete application of rules:** learners sometimes do not apply the rules properly because of lack of practise, therefore, they do not assimilate them.
- **False concepts hypothesised** Corder(1981): “ *I do not mean the teacher gives false information, but rather, incomplete information, so that logically he (the learner) may perhaps logically draw wrong conclusions”.* (pp.52-53). Hypothesizing false concepts can be considered as sort of generalization which is due to the learner’s limited knowledge of the target language.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I. THE CHOICE OF THE METHOD

Different research methods are available to different problems of investigation. The selection of the appropriate one is closely related to the nature of the issue, the population who is intended to take share in gathering and getting access to the required data.

The present study is based on the identification of the problematic area to be investigated through a linguistic description of the most recurrent errors in students' English language productions. The descriptive method is, thus, used along with an analysis of the gathered data. My attempt will be: to find out what kind of grammatical errors are most recurrent, and whether they are due to interlingual interference or to intralingual interference. This kind of investigation may be considered as limited and may represent a precious clue for further and more rigorous investigation.

The description of observed errors in the written compositions would limit my investigation to the students' papers because of the availability and the wide range of errors to be recorded, though the focus is on the most recurrent ones.

In order to determine the types of errors to be studied, the research will be conducted with pilot tests to increase the efficiency of the formal test later. This step is of great importance because this will limit the scope of my study and will exclude the types which are not pertinent to this study. The focus will be on errors presenting a high frequency of occurrence.

II. SAMPLING

Because of problems of organization, and since it requires a great deal of effort and much time to carry out the research on the whole population of the Department of English Language Studies, a representative sample of the population under study has to be chosen. In this respect, different ways of sampling are available. Among them, I opt for the random sampling, which seems to fit my study. This study is described as the purest form of probability sampling in which each member of the population has an equal chance of being selected.

III. POPULATION

The population subjected to the pilot test consists of all the first-year students of the English Department of Biskra University. My choice fell on this population on the grounds that first year- students are likely to make a wide range of errors that allow the researcher to get a larger corpus. Moreover, these learners are in a transitional phase in which they are exposed, for the first time, to a detailed grammar course. Hence, it is possible to measure the effect of interlingual interference as opposed to intralingual interference. This could provide teachers with better insights about grammar learning, and how to elaborate an efficient remedial work in this basic phase. Another factor that will facilitate the task for me is that being their teacher, I am in continuous touch with them, witnessing their difficulties.

The pilots tests included:

- Written compositions: first exam in written expression, linguistics and phonetics.
- Spontaneous discussion with students.

Identification of the population

The population subjected to the study consists of first year-students of the English Language Department at Biskra University, aged from 18 to 21. Their number is expected to range from 90 to 120. This number includes females and all the male students since they are not highly represented in number. All these learners have the same experience as they have been learning English for five years, during which the approach adopted was the communicative one. This teaching approach has been dominant since 1987 with the publication of the text books Spring 1 and Spring 2, New Lines, Midlines, Think it Over and later Comet. Their linguistic background is likely to be identical since they originate from the same secondary school.

IV. THE RESEARCH TOOLS

The main research tool used in my study consists of written compositions produced by the representative subjects. These provided me with a large corpus that would enable me conduct the error analysis. The other tools used to gather the necessary data were interviews with the subjects. Knowing students' opinions about their errors and their difficulties constitute my first-hand data. The interviews were unstructured to allow the students to be spontaneous in revealing their difficulties.

A questionnaire was administered to the teachers in charge of grammar. It was a short one because, as a general rule, with a few exceptions,, long questionnaires get less response than short ones. This questionnaire was intended to gather more information about the topic. It attempted to reveal

the recurrent errors in grammar which appeared in the learners' writings, and whether they were due to native language interference or to intralingual interference. Suggestions provided by teachers were great help.

V. STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

The present study comprises six chapters. The first one deals with the students' educational background, a contributory factor to errors. The second one presents the definition of grammar and some theoretical approaches to its teaching. The third chapter gives an account of the techniques of error analysis. The fourth chapter, the main one tackles the research work done on the learners' productions, identifies the most recurrent errors, analyse them. This chapter is followed by the fifth one in which the results recorded are displayed in tables and graphs. Finally, the study is ended up with sixth paragraph devoted to pedagogical implications in addition to some suggested recommendations.