CHAPTER ONE

LEARNERS' BACKGROUND

Introduction

In this chapter, I intend to bring out some of the factors which might have contributed to learners' errors in English and mainly in grammar as it is the scope of my study. I find it necessary to define the learners' educational background, in addition to other contributory factors such as streaming and some realities of the teaching of English in Algeria such as multilingualism, the fact that our country is a poor environment for learning English, the shortage of teaching material, the shortage of teachers' training and overcrowded classes.

I.1. Educational background

I.1.1   Mid school Studies

A new approach was put into practice in the Algerian school in 1987. Since then, the Algerian pupil has started learning English as a foreign language from the second year in the basic school (8AF) at a rate of four hours per week, and five hours per week for the 9 AF, an average total number of 200 hours yearly.

Spring is a two-stage course in English for middle- school pupils aged 13 to 15. It is communicatively oriented, roughly organized round six broad functions of the language:

- Describing
- Narrating
- Socializing
- Instructing
- Questioning
- Planning

Learning at the basic school is characterized by two major aspects (guideline: 8/9AF):

- Learning the language forms and how to manipulate them.
- Learning to use these language forms to communicate efficiently.

It is assumed that learners should have a minimum mastery of a range of usage to be ready to activate the forms for communication purposes. In order to achieve this, three main phases are suggested (ibid):

1- **Presentation** of the new material to express a given function is presented in contexts.

2- **Practice and presentation**: the language forms are isolated and practised in a series of activities or drills to be carried out at quick pace. These exercises should be meaningful and contextualized. Finally the forms will are consolidated.

3- **Confirmation and production**: the language is recycled and reproduced. This confirmation phase prepares the learners to a more personal use of language. The language so far learnt is recalled and activated to solve problems to play games or to take part in role playing. These activities should incorporate the characteristics of communication: information gap, and improvisation.

The communicative approach to the teaching of English, advocated for the implementation of Spring, can be briefly characterized as leaner-centred approach that activates learning through the use of the language and provides the learners with opportunities to interact in ordinary and natural situations.

According to the syllabus, pupils are supposed to have acquired enough structures and vocabulary which enable them to use English to

express themselves appropriately, either orally or in writing. However, the failure of the system is confirmed in the preamble of syllabuses for English:

> " *Although this supposedly acquired knowledge seems to be significant (50 linguistic structures and 1000 words), exam results show that most learners experience the greatest difficulties in using the foreign language correctly and appropriately"*
>
> (p 7)

In fact, the B.E.F results of English prove that the system in the middle school is subject to failure. This greatly affect secondary as well as university studies. Hence, a number of questions should be raised: Is this due to the inappropriateness of such an approach? To our social context? To the methods and techniques used? To the lack of supporting material which are restricted to the course book? Or to the lack of experience and awareness of teachers of the applied approach? This issue is worth investigating in another study because mine is limited to the analysis of errors in grammar.

I. I.2. Secondary studies

The secondary school studies consist of three years during which three hours are allocated to the study of English for all streams.

As I have mentioned previously, the failure of the system adopted in the middle school is reflected on the secondary studies. During the first year, teachers spent too much time to the brushing up of the previously studied linguistic stock. However, very few students reach an acceptable level of performance which enables them to go further.

At the end of the first year, students are supposed to be able to understand a simple oral message said in every day English in interpersonal exchange (syllabus for English):

- They should understand the broad lines of a short talk delivered in standard English.
- They should be able to communicate on a limited number of topics in correct simple English.
- They should be able to read and write authentic texts and documents.
- They should undertake simple tasks in relation with sample studies.

The above skills are supposed to be achieved through the following functions:

- Describing places, persons, objects and tasks.
- Narrating an event, a fact.
- Relating personal experience.
- Asking for and giving advice.
- Making simple comparisons.
- Formulating intentions and prospects.
- Instructing.

During the second year, students are expected to:

- Grasp an oral message of intermediate difficulty.
- Grasp the headlines of a medium talk in standard English on a limited number of topics familiar to them.
- Communicate correctly in simple spontaneous language with some fluency.
- Use reference books (mostly dictionaries)

- Organize and write simple passages correctly within the limit imposed by the functions studied: Describing, classifying, comparing, contrasting, questioning, reporting deducing and narrating.

During the third year, students are expected to have a certain mastery of the four skills. These skills will be achieved through the exploitation of the functions seen in the previous years, and very few introduced for the first time such as arguing. The syllabus of the third year was built around themes, which allow the use of several interrelated language functions. The language structures are to be studied and their functions deduced. The rules then could be drawn, made explicit, and then consolidated through appropriate activities.

In accordance with the objectives set to the teaching and learning of foreign languages in our country, which states that learners should achieve communication in the various forms, aspects and dimensions, nevertheless, we can say that the objectives are partly fulfilled, the fact which is confirmed by first-year university students' productions in which a significant number of errors is recorded. Numerous factors may contribute to this phenomenon in addition to the previous inadequate teaching, among these factors, we may cite streaming and other realities to the teaching of English.

I.2. Some contributory factors

I.2.1. Streaming

Streaming represents one of the factors leading to students' incompetence. According to the system adopted at the university level, first-year students' orientation is determined in terms of the grades obtained in the baccalaureate exam and which are computer processed without taking into consideration the students' aspirations, and mainly their level in the English language because the   exam marks do not really reflect their linguistic competence. Thus, some of them find themselves in the department of English with mean capacities in the language; as a result, they spend four years or more struggling just to move to the following year and ultimately to get the " licence"; but unfortunately without having the required qualifications which would allow them to teach other learners who might on their turn become teachers.

I.2.2 Multilingualism

If we consider the status of English in our area, we find that it is classified as the fourth language for most of the students, coming after dialectal Arabic, standard Arabic and French; Whereas it takes the fifth position for some other students who use the Berbere language. This variety undoubtedly influences the learning of English and may constitute a source of difficulty for learners. This status of the English   language   does not favour its learning and result into lack of motivation on the part of learners, added to the fact that other subjects studied in the middle school as well as the secondary school are provided with a higher coefficient than

English. This makes learners focus on the other subjects and neglect English for the sake of having better results in exams.

I.2.3. Poor environment for learning English

In Algeria, English is restricted to the classroom for most of the learners. The large majority do not have the opportunity to use it somewhere else, very few get access to the internet and have the possibility to practice English, thus, to improve their proficiency in the language; as a result the language structures seen in the class are quickly forgotten.

I.2.4 Shortage of teaching material

In spite of the attempts of the Ministry of Education to promote English, as the new programme which has been launched concerning a new approach called " Competency- based approach", no other supporting material rather than the book is available and not always in sufficient quantities. Moreover, magazines and newspapers printed in English are inexistent in our area. So, how can the objectives set be achieved in such a non- motivating environment?

I.2.5. Shortage of teachers' training

Most of the teachers, especially those recruited in secondary schools start teaching without pre-service training. The theoretical courses they had during their university studies concerning the different approaches, methods and techniques vanish when facing the reality. This makes the situation difficult for them. Not only beginners, but other more experienced

teachers are also concerned because in-service training is necessary as it helps them seek efficiency through innovation and coordination.

I.2.6. Overcrowded classrooms

Overcrowded classes constitute a great problem for teaching the language as: on the one hand the same class may contain different linguistic levels as well as different learning strategies among learners, the fact which may make the situation difficult for the teacher. On the other hand, a large number of learners is not easy to manage, especially if just few of them are motivated and consider English as an imposed subject and a difficult one.

Conclusion

Learning a foreign language is a complex process which involves interrelated variables, not easy to identify and which require attention to be partly understood. It is why, I believe that a view on the learners' background including such factors as their previous learning as well as some other contributory factors such as streaming, lack of teaching material and the educational and social contexts in which the process takes place would undoubtedly facilitate for me the investigation concerning learners' errors. Besides, I need to define grammar, the linguistic descriptions available, as well as the most used approaches and methods to the teaching of foreign languages before dealing with the analysis of the learners' errors.