

## An Account of Sources of Errors in Language Learners' Interlanguage

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**Abstract:** EFL learners' errors are a major area of study in the field of contrastive linguistics and SLA research. In this article, a roughly representative account of the significance and importance of errors has been provided. Various volumes by specialists in applied linguistics, language teaching, and SLA research have been used as authoritative sources of information to provide as comprehensive an account of interlanguage errors as possible. In the course of the discussion it becomes clear that the sources of errors are no longer sought merely in the language learners' mother tongue ( i.e., negative transfer from L1 ). But, unlike the traditional beliefs, it has become evident that mother tongue interference is not the sole source of errors, and there are many other sources from which errors originate. In this article, the writer has tried not only to show the importance of errors in EFL learners' speech and writing but also to present a clearly-depicted and comprehensive framework regarding the sources of these errors so as to help readers especially teachers to recognize such sources easily and quickly and be able both to predict the critical interlingual and intralingual aspects which contribute to learners' erroneous linguistic behavior and to deal with their errors effectively and efficiently.

**Key words:** learners' errors, sources of error, contrastive analysis, L1 transfer/mother tongue interference, interlingual and intralingual errors

### 1. Background and Significance of Errors.

The SLA researchers and structuralist tradition prior to the 1960s strictly emphasized that second language learners' errors be prevented and, in case of occurrence, corrected at all costs. They were believed to destroy the whole process of language learning. Over the past few decades, however, attitudes towards learners' errors have undergone significant changes following the changes in the methodological approaches to foreign language teaching, new insights from SLA research about the nature and significance of errors, and revolutionary research into the nature of interlanguage (Corder 1967, 1976, 1981, Selinker 1972, 1984, Eckman 1981, 1984)

Errors are no longer seen as devil signs of failure to be prevented and eradicated. On the contrary, errors are considered signs of developmental processes involved in the learning of language. The significant contributions of language learners' errors to the field of language learning and teaching have been widely reiterated in the literature ( Keshavarz 1994, Corder 1967, Richards 1971). H. D. Brown (2007) maintains that " By the late 1960s, SLA began to be examined in much the same way that first language acquisition had been studied for some time: learners were looked on not as producers of malformed, imperfect language replete with mistakes but as intelligent and creative beings proceeding through logical, systematic stages of acquisition, creatively acting upon their linguistic environment as they encountered its forms and functions in meaningful contexts. By a gradual process of trial and error and hypothesis testing, learners slowly and tediously succeeded in establishing closer and closer approximations to the systems used by native speakers of the language." (p.256)

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## **2. Sources of Errors**

Traditionally, under the influence of the strong version of the Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis the sole source of language learners' errors was recognized as transfer from the learner's native language. Errors resulting from mother tongue interference were called Interlingual Errors. However, in Error Analysis although interference from the mother tongue is acknowledged as a source of errors, it is by no means considered to be the only source. In the field of error analysis, many other sources of errors have been identified which extend beyond the scope of interlingual errors.

The concept of interlingual errors was defined above. Interlingual errors can be subdivided further into different parts. The following overall classification would represent an account of the most important types of interlingual errors.

## **3. Interlingual Errors**

According to Keshavarz's taxonomy of the sources of errors, interlingual errors result from the transfer of phonological, morphological, grammatical, lexico-semantic, and stylistic elements of the learner's mother tongue to the learning of the target language ( Keshavarz, 1994, p.102). These five types of interlingual errors which have been taken from Keshavarz (1994) will be elaborated on drawing on some other scholars in the field for a broad-based view.

### **3.1. Transfer of Phonological Elements**

Phonologically speaking, there are certain features specific to any individual language. Such features may not be found in another language, or even if they exist in another language, they may take new characteristics which again make them distinctive features in that particular language. Terence Odlin is completely right in saying "... sounds in two languages often show different physical characteristics, including both acoustic characteristics ( e.g., the pitch of a sound) and articulatory characteristics ( e.g., how widely the mouth is open in producing a sound )" ( 1990, p. 113). For example, Persian-speaking learners of English pronounce words such as / street / and / start / as / estrit / and / estart / respectively. This is because there is no initial consonant cluster in Persian, while English allows initial consonant clusters in its words. Persian learners of English, therefore, add an / e / before words which start with 's' followed by another consonant.

### **3.2. Transfer of Morphological Elements**

Morphological elements can be a source of error in foreign language learning, for example, " when the semantic interpretation of some nouns is collective in one language, but the semantic interpretation of their equivalents in another language is sometimes collective and sometimes [ these nouns ] are count plurals" (Fallahi, 1991, p. 125 ). The word " cattle", for example, is singular in form, plural in number in English. This word in Persian, however, is singular in form, singular in number. A Persian-speaking student may, therefore, produce an ungrammatical sentence like the following based on his knowledge of his native language: That man has many \* cattles (cattle).

Following the rule of adding the suffix of plurality to a singular noun to make it plural, the Persian student adds the plural's' to the word 'cattle' to make it plural, not knowing that this word, i.e., cattle, is plural by itself in English because it is a collective noun.

### **3.3. Transfer of Grammatical Elements**

Variations in grammatical structures are one of the main sources of interference errors. Learners of a foreign language transfer, to a considerable extent, the grammatical elements of their mother tongue to the target language. Most Contrastive Analysis books devote far more sections to those erroneous sentences which result from transfer of grammatical structures than from other areas of transfer. In his Contrastive Linguistics and Analysis of Errors, Fallahi ( 1991 ) devotes all but two chapters to analyzing interference errors resulting from transfer of grammatical structures.

As an example of transfer of grammatical elements, let's refer to what Fisiak ( 1981, p. 200 ) has specified in his Contrastive Linguistics and the Language Teacher. In a comparison between possessive forms in English

and Punjabi, Fisiak explains that the possessive construction in English may be formed in two ways: Either by an 's phrase before the noun, or by an 'of' phrase after it; e.g., 'the man's hat', 'the hat of the man'. In Punjabi, there is only one possessive construction, coming before the noun, but similar in structure, to the English 'of' phrase which comes after the noun, equivalently 'man of hat'. These contrasts appear to be the source of errors like the following: 'There is a shoe of a pair. 'for' There is a pair of shoes. "Some crisps of packets 'for' Some packets of crisps', 'His hand of the fingers 'for' The fingers of his hand'

#### 4. Intralingual Errors

Keshavarz ( 1994, p. 107 ) defines intralingual and developmental errors as " errors caused by the mutual interference of items in the target language, i.e., the influence of one target language item upon another." These errors are divided into the following categories:

**Overgeneralization**, also referred to as ignorance of rule restriction, "occurs when the learner has mastered a general rule but does not yet know all the exceptions to that rule " ( Ziahosseiny, 1999, p. 126 ). For example, a Persian learner of English may, on the basis of his limited knowledge of past tense form, use 'ed' morpheme on irregular verbs. For example, 'Ali eated the apple. ' instead of 'Ali ate the apple. '

**Transfer of training** refers to the cases " when teaching creates language rules that are not part of the L2..." ( Ziahosseiny, 1999, p. 126 ). In English classes, for example, students may hear their teacher say " There is little snow.", and by false analogy, they produce erroneous sentences like the following unacceptable sentences illustrated by Yarmohammadi ( 1995, p. 63 ) : '\* The snow is little.', '\* The snow is much.'. Or as another example, the students may produce such sentences as '\* The man is high.', and ' \* The mountain is tall.' due to transfer of training, e.g., when the students hear their teacher say ' The man was highly admired.' and ' It was a tall building.'. As another example, let's refer to Keshavarz ( 1994, p. 113): The erroneous sentence '\* I am liking to continue my studies.' may be due to overgeneralization of structures learned in pattern drills, such as the following: I write.I am writing., I read. I am reading., I study. I am studying.

#### 5. Language Learning and Communication Strategies

Language learning strategies refer to "the strategies used by the learner in dealing with the target language" ( Keshavarz, 1994, p. 114). Overgeneralization and transfer of rules from the mother tongue are two instances of second-languag learning strategies. A child may produce such a simplified utterance as ' me water ' to indicate his need for water. Tarone (1981: 419, cited in Ellis, 2008, p. 503) defines communication strategies as involving " a mutual attempt of two interlocutors to agree on a meaning in situations where requisite meaning structures do not seem to be shared".

Tarone's (1981) taxonomy of communication strategies (cited in Brown, H. D., 1987, p.183) provides a useful description of these strategies which are as follows :

##### 5.1. Avoidance

- **Topic avoidance** (The learner simply tries not to talk about concepts for which the TL item or structure is not known)
- **Message abandonment** (The learner begins to talk about a concept but is unable to continue and stops in mid- utterance.)

##### 5.2. Paraphrase

- **Approximation** (Use of a single target language vocabulary item or structure, which the learner knows is not correct, but which shares enough semantic features in common with the desired item to satisfy the speaker (e.g., *pipe* for *waterpipie*)
- **Word coinage** (The learner makes up a new word in order to communicate a desired concept (e.g., *airball* for balloon)
- **Circumlocution** (The learner describes the characteristics or elements of the object or action instead of using appropriate TL item or structure ("*she is, uh, smoking something. I don't know what's its name. That's, uh, Persian, and we use in Turkey, a lot of.*")

##### 5.3. C. Conscious transfer or borrowing

- **Literal translation** (The learner translates word for word from the native language ("He invites him to drink," for" They toast one another."))

- **Language switch** (The learner uses the native language term without bothering to translate ( e.g., *balon* for *balloon*)
- 5.4. Appeal for assistance** (The learner asks for the correct term ("what is this? What called?"))
- 5.5. Mime** (The learner uses nonverbal strategies in place of a lexical item or action (e.g., clapping one's hand to illustrate applause)

## 6. Conclusion

What would you do if you had to give a guideline to a language teacher requesting you to help him with his students' failure in learning a foreign language? Would you tell him to seek the remedy in their background knowledge of their native language or to search for many other possible sources of difficulty as well?

You would certainly go the second way if you were aware of the detailed studies related to the nature and sources of language learners' errors. Nowadays, unlike traditional beliefs, errors are not regarded evil signs of failure to be prevented and eradicated at all costs. Neither are they sought merely in the learners' native language. On the contrary, errors are considered as signs of learners' minds being actively involved in the learning process and also as signs of development. Furthermore, errors are viewed as resulting from different sources other than the mere interference from the L1 background knowledge.

What has been discussed so far can provide language teachers and course designers with insightful guidelines for better understanding of the nature of errors. Such an understanding can help them and all those in charge of foreign language teaching adopt appropriate systematic approaches to deal with and finally correct, if necessary, foreign language learners' errors.

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