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The analysis of second language learners' difficulties: the case of Polish learners of English

Abstract

The article discusses the occurrence of difficulties which is unavoidable on the way to the target language. In the theoretical part, we will deal with the basic assumptions of Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA), Interlanguage, competence and various sources of errors. In the following part of the paper, we will concentrate on the analysis of errors which might occur during the learning process. More specifically, we will pay attention to the problems faced by Polish learners of English. The analysis will be based on both written and spoken corpus – that is PELCRA, where one can identify various erroneous examples made by L2 learners.

Keywords: errors, transfer, interference, first language, second language, English language teaching

1. Introduction

It is common knowledge that success in learning English as a second language can be achieved by successful transition from L1 (first language) to L2 (second language – target language). Hence, in the process of teaching, it is necessary to take into consideration

a linguistic comparison between two languages. More specifically, a foreign language teacher should be cognizant of the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 with a view to predicting and understanding learners' errors which occur while teaching English to L2 learners.

It is of crucial importance to encompass the awareness and understanding of the errors thanks to the Contrastive Analysis (CA) which deals with prediction of errors based on two languages – L1 and L2 (Target Language) and which can enable us to eliminate them in due course and as a result facilitate the learning process with a view to obtaining target language competence. Error Analysis (EA), which deals with detailed description and analysis of the errors made by language learners, also contributes to progress towards the target language. Interlanguage (coined by Selinker, 1972) is based on learner's development of second language knowledge and includes characteristics of the learner's first language, some characteristics of the second language and some general characteristics in interlanguage systems.

In order to achieve success in the target language (TL), that is – to use the language correctly, but also appropriately in a number of communicative situations, it is necessary to master both linguistic competence (Chomsky, 1965) and communicative competence. Whereas the former pertains to the knowledge of the language code, such as grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, the latter constitutes four components: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence (Hymes, 1972) and should be taken into account during the process of teaching.

2. Contrastive Analysis

According to *Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis* (CAH), L1 interference brings forth errors in L2 (Ellis, 1995). Thus, L2 learners must identify differences between L1 and L2 and as a result form new habits – habit formation (Hsu, 2013). CAH is based on the premise that L2 errors are caused by a negative L1 transfer (the L2 learning process is dominated by L1 with its established habits). Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) (Lado, 1957) is usually associated with behaviourism. The main goals of Contrastive Analysis (CA) are to make foreign language teaching more effective, to focus on the differences between the first language (L1) and the target language (TL) on the assumption that:
1) foreign language learning is based on the mother tongue,
2) similarities facilitate learning (positive transfer) and differences cause problems (negative transfer/interference),
3) through CA, one can predict problems which can be considered in the curriculum.

However, CA does not predict or account for all L2 errors. Admittedly, L1 interference does not always contribute to the occurrence of L2 errors (Lightbown, Spada, 2006). Since learning difficulties could not be predicted by CA; CA only helps in the explanation of errors. Admittedly, not all problems predicted by Contrastive Analysis are difficult for L2 learners. In other words, there are a number of linguistic features and peculiarities in the target language which can be cumbersome for learners and which do not necessarily

pertain to the alleged differences between L1 and L2. Hence, some problems which do occur in the learner's performance are not necessarily predicted by CA. In addition, a number of errors predicted by CA were not identified in learners' language and at the same time some errors were made by learners irrespective of their L1. Hence, this is a reason why CA undergoes criticism due to its shortcomings and why Error Analysis pioneered by Corder appears.

3. Error Analysis

Error Analysis constitutes a counter-theory and is an alternative to Contrastive Analysis (CA). Error Analysis was developed by Stephen Corder. It appeared in order to overcome the shortcomings of Contrastive Analysis and facilitate the learning process. Contrary to Contrastive Analysis (CA), Error Analysis (EA) studies errors made by L2 learners and analyzes them from all possible sources (Brown, 2000). It regarded second language errors as similar to those which occur in first language acquisition (developmental errors). It deals with a detailed description of errors based on the target language. In other words, the errors are produced by learners who make faulty inferences about the rules of the target language. However, it does not take into consideration L2 learners' linguistic competence. It is crude to take into consideration Brown's distinction between mistakes and errors.

Error Analysis was criticized as it was unable to diagnose a student learning problems reliably, mainly because L2 learners tended to avoid some L2 items, especially difficult ones. Regardless of the enormous contribution made by both Analyses – that is Contrastive Analysis (CA) and Error Analysis (EA), neither of them is sufficient in order to identify potential problems encountered by the learners attempting to acquire the target language.

4. Interlanguage

Interlanguage constitutes a continuum between the first language (L1) and the target language (TG, L2). It occurs as a separate linguistic system based on learner's target language production (Selinker, 1972). It demonstrates a L2 learner's linguistic competence between L1 and L2 (Richards, 1974) and deals with the analysis of the transitional language system of L2 learners (Yip, 1995). In other words, it demonstrates L2 learners' transitional competence between L1 and L2 which stands for a unique linguistic system (Corder, 1971). Interlanguage is developed during the learning process by a second language learner who is not fully proficient in L2 and who is trying to reach the target language by increasing his/her both linguistic and communicative competence.

Errors constitute an integral part in the learning process and are indispensable. According to Selinker (1992, quoted in Ho, 2003), making errors is considered to be "a device the learner uses in order to learn". In other words, making errors means learning, progressing and with a view to reaching language proficiency – the target language. Thus, they constitute an integral, inseparable and unavoidable part in the learning process and therefore it is necessary to go through both errors and mistakes.

When discussing interlanguage, it is also necessary to mention *interlanguage fossilization* which can also occur during the learning process and which is based on cessation of progress on the road to L2 proficiency – the target language (TL) (Ellis, 1989: 42).

5. Competence

A language learner must focus on both the correct and appropriate use of language. Whereas the former pertains to linguistic competence, the latter encompasses communicative competence. Thus, it is necessary to distinguish various types of communicative **competence** which should be followed in second language teaching.

1) **linguistic competence** (Chomsky, 1965) constitutes the knowledge of the language code – grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation;
2) **sociolinguistic competence** – the knowledge of sociocultural rules, more specifically the knowledge of how to use and respond to language appropriately;
3) **discourse competence** – the knowledge of combining language structures into a cohesive and coherent text of various types;
4) **strategic competence** – the ability to keep the communication.

> […] a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others (Hymes, 1972: 277).

As a result, only through the development of all the types of competence can a learner obtain the necessary and appropriate skills for effective and successful communication and satisfaction.

6. Sources of errors

Richards (1974) distinguishes two types of errors: **interlanguage errors** and **intralanguage errors**. The latter consist of: overgeneralization, ignorance of rule restrictions, incomplete application of rules, and false concepts hypothesized (Richards, 1971).

Dulay, Burt, and Krashen (1982) proposed six error taxonomies, including linguistic (e.g., phonology, syntax, morphology, semantics, lexicon, and discourse), surface strategy (e.g., omission and addition errors), misformation (e.g., regularization, archi-forms, and alternating forms errors), misordering, comparative (e.g. developmental, interlingual, ambiguous, and unique errors), and communicative effect (e.g., global and local errors) taxonomies.

Brown (1980) categorized four sources of errors: **interlingual transfer** which errors are interfered by L2 learners' mother tongue, **intralingual transfer** where errors occur from L2 development of a new linguistic system, **context of learning** where errors are caused by misleading explanations or contexts, and finally **communication strategies** based on wrong techniques which cause errors.

Ellis (1997) suggests identification of errors through two ways: either by comparing L2 learners' original sentence with a reconstructed one or by analyzing the errors of L2 utterance, such as omission, misinformation, misordering, and overgeneralization (Hsu, 2013). Still, adds Hsu (2013), it is not easy to analyze what makes learners produce the errors.

7. The role of a teacher

Following Harmer (1991: 241), we may state that 'often the teacher needs to encourage students to participate or needs to make suggestions about how students may proceed in an activity when there is silence or when they are confused about what to do next. This is one of the teacher's important roles – the role of a prompter'.

Harmer (1991: 242) states as well that "we can talk about the teacher as a tutor in the sense of someone who acts as a coach and as a resource where students are involved in their own work, and call upon the teacher mainly for advice and guidance. The teacher will be able to help them clarify ideas by pointing out errors. The teacher can also offer the students advice about how to get the most out of their learning and what to do if they want to study more".

8. Research objectives

The purpose of the article is to concentrate on selected instances of errors made by the learners, which are the result of their L1 transfer. We wish to demonstrate how particular linguistic items are applied incorrectly and inappropriately in a number of contexts due to the erroneous transition from L1 to L2. We also offer some solutions in order to either avoid or eliminate such errors.

On the basis of the collection of written and spoken modes, an English Learner Corpus was created at the University of Lodz (Poland), by a group of scholars, who set up a research group called PELCRA (which stands for Polish and English Language Corpora for Research and Applications). This corpus, including other projects, is available online and thanks to their hard work and dedication, we may use the corpus for the needs of the content of our article and refer to the students' tendencies in committing L2 errors.

9. Grammar errors

We were able to observe grammar errors, which we grouped in accordance with the part of grammar the errors occur in. The instances listed below originate from excerpts from student's pieces of writing created during composition classes at universities they attend English philology classes as well as from their conversation classes. Hence, both written and spoken mode, as outlined above, of their L2 is enumerated below.

9.1. Articles

The first part is centred on articles. In case of this part of English grammar the problems concentrate on two main areas, namely: overuse and underuse of articles. The overuse of articles may be evidenced based on too frequent use of the definite article *the*, where it is unnecessary, as demonstrated below:

1. I went to *the* Gdańsk.
2. I visited *the* Sierpc.

The underuse is predominantly observable in case of absence in the use of an indefinite article *a*, as exemplified below:

3. When I was…boy, I could….

In addition, we were able to notice that L2 learners find it problematic to distinguish between the indefinite article *a* and its variant *an,* as in the instance below:

4. an <u>y</u>oung man.

9.2. Auxiliary verbs

The second element of English grammar that turned out to be very challenging for L2 learners is a group of auxiliary verbs. L2 learners have problems with distinguishing the proper use of *have*, *can*, and *could* in short answers. It is worth emphasizing here the lack of correspondence between the auxiliary verb used in a general question and the one used in any short answer. This is evidenced by the instances below:

5. *Have you been* to the USA yet? No, *I didn't.*
6. I *haven't seen* her *yesterday*.

Our observations prove that L2 students have problems with identification of perfect forms and with their relevant application in appropriate contexts. The erroneous combination of the past tense and perfect forms undermines a communication act.

Additionally, there are problems with the proper use of these verbs: *may*, *might*, *could*, *be able to*, *must*, *have to*, *should*, *mustn't*, as listed below:

7. <u>Do</u> you <u>must</u> work on Sundays?
8. <u>Will</u> you <u>can</u> help me with my homework assignment?
9. I <u>musted be</u> at school yesterday.

The list of instances (7–9) demonstrates how complex the use of auxiliary verbs is for non-native users of English. Commencing with instance 7, we observe unnecessary inclusion of the verb *must* after a primary auxiliary verb *do.* Similarly, in instance 8 there are two verbs *will* and *can,* which is highly ungrammatical and confusing for any potential recipient of this sentence. And eventually instance 9 contains the use of the verb *must* in the past tense, which is highly inappropriate, as the equivalence of *must* in the past is *had to*. However, the use of *must* in such a form proves lack of fluency of L2 user.

9.3. Prepositions

The subsequent subgroup of grammar errors is represented by prepositions. Here, the students' problems arise due to L1 transfer. We observe different use and meaning in their L1 and L2 (English). The instances are as follows:

10. I went <u>to</u> home.
11. I play <u>on</u> guitar.
12. I speak English <u>on</u> the lesson.
13. Thank you <u>from the mountain</u>.

What is instantly observable in the examples 10–12 is the overuse of prepositions, which points to standard L1 transfer, as in the contexts produced in their L1s, students obligatorily place prepositions. In English they are not necessary. Example no. 13 seems to be of different nature, as here we observe too literal transition of the corresponding expression from L1 resulting in total miscommunication. In both phrases applied in L1 and L2 languages prepositions are present, but the overall meaning is completely different.

9.4. Adjective/adverb distinction

In this section we focused on the analysis of the students' comprehension of adjectives and adverbs in the contexts, where their spelling remained identical. As expected prior to our analysis, L2 students tend to have problems with *adjective/adverb distinction*, which is proved by the following instances (based on the paper version of Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 1995):

14. hard (adj.), hard (adv), e.g. It must be hard for her, bringing up three kinds on her own. She had been working hard all morning.
15. early (adj.), early (adv), e.g. We have booked two weeks' holiday in early May. I arrived early, to make sure of a seat.
16. far (adj.), far (adv), e.g. In the far distance she could see the outlines of tall, city buildings. I wonder how far we have walked today.
17. near (adj.), near (adv), e.g. It seems that his diaries are near to the truth as we shall ever get. Don't sit too near to the screen.

The instances 14–17 demonstrate the use of the above-mentioned words: *hard*, *early*, *and far and near* as two different word categories: adjectives or adverbs. However, what L2 students face are recurring problems with the identification and naming basic word categories in English due to lack of awareness of English terminology. Such awareness should be outlined at the intermediate/upper-intermediate level. However, it is not practised by L2 teachers; hence the problem persists even at FCE level/first year at university. L2 students cannot find the differences between the uses of the afore-mentioned words as two different word categories and admit their lack of comprehension of the applicable contexts deriving from different sources, e.g. English-English dictionaries or available miscellaneous online corpora. We note L2 learners' lack of adequate exposure to English terminology during prior education stages.

10. Word order problem/translation deficiencies

The subsequent deficient use of English is due to L2 students' problem with their appropriate use of English word order, which is totally different from their L1. Hence, we may quote the next instance, which is the following:

18. Pol. *Do sklepu wszedł mężczyzna.*

English literal translation provided by L2 learners is: *To shop/store entered man.*

The result is twofold, namely L2 students tend to use unacceptable word order in English. That is their first inappropriateness. The second part of the problem is literal translation, namely a very precise transfer of their L1 habit (here their native language – Polish) and a very unfortunate translation, which initially seems incomprehensible. Subsequently, it may become understandable but only after a careful analysis of the speakers' intentions. Moreover, we observe a lack of articles in the English literal translation, which additionally proves our point. Eventually, by analysing the message conveyed to any potential recipient, predominantly a native speaker of English, we may very readily observe that old/new information is conveyed differently in English than in Polish.

11. Lexical errors

In case of a different type of errors, namely lexical errors, we managed to observe problems with the distinction of the semantics of verbs, as pointed out by the instances enumerated below:

19. Can you *borrow* me some money?

In this context we noticed lack of awareness of the semantic contrast between two misleading verbs, which are *lend* and *borrow*. Thus, instance 19 should be expressed in such a way: Can you lend me some money? *Borrow* is suitable, however, in the context of this kind: Can I borrow some money from you?

The subsequent problem we were able to observe comprising this type of errors is the problem with the distinction of '-ed/-ing' adjectives, e.g. *interested/interesting*, as in:

20. I'm *interesting* in…

This problem persists even at higher proficiency level of L2 English acquisition, although it is constantly taught during learners' English education. The reason for it may be that such clusters as *interested/interesting* correspond to different lexis L2 learners acquire in their native language. Again, we may point to transferring L1 habits into learnt L2.

12. Pronunciation errors

The final group of errors we managed to observe in our analysis is a group of pronunciation errors. This group is immense; however, we centred our attention on the most basic, but recurrent and challenging problems in the pronunciation of English acquired by L2 users. Thus, we focused on demonstrating two pairs of instances, followed by the last instance, which reflects the most frequent pronunciation for non-native English speakers, which is 'th' cluster (instance 23). Let us commence, however, with the afore-mentioned pairs of instances. They are enumerated below:

21. Face – sur*face*
22. Table – comfor*table*

In both instances 21 and 22 we observed that pronunciation of the underlined part is identical, with the use of the diphthong /ei/, which points to erroneous way of pronouncing the endings of the underlined words, *surface* and *comfortable*. However, the presence of the diphthong /ei/ is justifiable in case of two left-handed words, namely *face* and *table*. Instead, two right-handed words *surface* and *comfortable* should be pronounced correspondingly as: /ˈsəfəs/ and /kʌmftəbəl/. The reason for such imperfect pronunciation is lack of awareness of the prosodic exceptionality of each English word, no uniform rule applied in such instances as well as the erroneous transfer of language habit acquired while using the above-mentioned words.

23. <u>th</u>rough

This instance demonstrates the most frequent and challenging cluster for non-native speakers. The difficulties arise when no similarity or existence of such a cluster is observable in the students' L2. In case of Polish, for instance, such a cluster is non-existent. We, as English teachers, are obviously familiar that pronunciation of *th* cluster is changeable in English. Hence, it is mostly erroneously pronounced by L2 users, predominantly as 'f', followed by substituted sounds such as, for instance 's'.

13. Observations and conclusions

Concluding our observations we may state that no matter how profound the exposure of the L2 learner to English is (ranging from pre-school experience to high school/secondary technical school or university level) the same language deficits prevail. The reason for such a state of affairs is imperfect prediction from the teachers to avoid/eliminate the inappropriate use of the abovementioned structures in the acquired language.

We may venture a claim that it is due to teachers' inability to control and decrease the imperfect use of English or their negligence in providing appropriate feedback to L2 students. The non-native teachers of English, with their long-term teaching experience in a foreign language, must be equipped with necessary tools and energy to implement relevant means to predict what may be expected, surprising and finally cognitively challenging for L2 learners.

Teacher's feedback is absolutely necessary in the afore-mentioned cases, as silence or negligence in such vital cases results in developing a subsequent erroneous habit, which accompanies students at more proficient levels of their adventure with English, no matter how long their English education is. The increase of students' exposure to new structures divergent in Polish and English, e.g. article system, word order, lexis, grammar (e.g. complexity of future forms) and pronunciation are vital with a view to achieving success and self-confidence in the fluent use of English.

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Streszczenie
Analiza trudności uczących się drugiego języka: przypadek polskich uczniów uczących się języka angielskiego

W artykule omówiono trudności, z którymi mierzą się uczący się drugiego języka. W części teoretycznej przedstawiono podstawowe założenia analizy kontrastowej (*contrastive analysis*), analizy błędów (*error analysis*), międzyjęzyka, a także kompetencji uczniów i różne źródła błędów przez nich popełnianych.
W artykule skoncentrowano się na analizie błędów, które mogą wystąpić podczas procesu uczenia się. Zwrócono uwagę na problemy, przed którymi stoją polscy uczniowie uczący się języka angielskiego. Analiza oparta została zarówno na korpusie pisemnym, jak i mówionym, czyli PELCRA, pozwalających zidentyfikować różne błędne przykłady użycia zaobserwowane wśród uczniów uczących się drugiego języka.

Słowa kluczowe: błędy, transfer, ingerencja, pierwszy język, drugi język, nauczanie języka angielskiego