



The differences between pre-intermediate and advanced learners' sources of Syntactic errors

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ABSTRACT

To investigate the differences between advanced and (lower) intermediate learners' sources of errors, two groups of eighty homogenous EFL Iranian learners were selected. The first group were eighty advanced English learners of one institute in Kerman at FCE (pre-intermediate level) level and the second group were eighty lower intermediate English learners of the same institute at COMB 1 (advanced) level. The researcher observed the subjects' performances and made a ten-hour audio-recording of their performances. The recorded tapes were transcribed. The findings of the study revealed that firstly, lower intermediate learners committed much more errors than the advanced ones (3360 errors versus 753), having equal time; secondly, there were significant differences between the intermediate and advanced learners' sources of errors. The intermediate learners mostly committed interlingual errors while most advanced learners committed intralingual errors. Both groups committed idiosyncratic errors too. Thirdly, there were meaningful differences between the two proficiency groups' types of intralingual errors; the intermediate learners committed much more overgeneralization and undergeneralization errors than the advanced learners, while both groups had equal faulty categorization errors.

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Introduction

After 1970, numerous attempts have been made at classifying second language (L_2) errors, at pointing out their sources. A clear understanding of the sources of learners' errors can enable second/foreign language teachers to detect the process of L_2 learning. The analysis of the sources of errors is a crucial factor in the study of learners' errors. Corder (1973) has suggested that one should look for errors that occur repeatedly to observe the rule that the learner may be using and try to explain the psychological aspect of errors. Although EA considers the learner's first language (L_1) interference as a source of errors, it is by no means considered to be the only source. Empirical studies showed that other sources rather than L_1 interference are involved.

Types of errors based on their sources

There are two main positions on the sources of errors in foreign language learning. One is that errors are due to L_1 interference. Transfer, 'mother tongue influence' (Corder, 1967) or 'native language influence' (Gass, 1996) is defined as the "influence that the learner's L_1 exerts on the acquisition of an L_2 " (Ellis, 1997, p.51). Wilkins (1972) has argued that when learning a foreign language, the learner already knows his/her L_1 and it is the same thing which s/he attempts to transfer. According to McLaughlin (1988), interference errors can occur because learners do not have the necessary information in the TL language or the attentional capacity to activate the appropriate TL language routine. The other, the 'creative construction' theory, proposes that the processes used in acquiring an L_1 and learning a foreign language are identical, thus the errors are alike. Intralingual errors are caused by the mutual interference of items in the TL and they demonstrate the learner's effort to build up hypotheses about the TL based on

his/her limited experience or training. Krahnke and Christison (1983) have argued that most of the errors that learners produce are due to the gradually increasing control over the new linguistic system of the TL.

A third possibility is that at least some errors can be related neither to L_1 interference nor to the TL developmental strategies. Corder (1967) has proposed that language learners develop IL grammars (idiosyncratic dialects), and that errors will not necessarily be based on either the L_1 or the TL. The learner's dialect is regular, systematic, meaningful and unstable. The learner's language is unique to a particular individual and the grammar of this language is peculiar to that individual alone.

Types of Intralingual errors

Richards (1971a) has classified the intralingual and developmental errors into four basic groups; firstly, overgeneralization: happening when learners create a deviant structure on the basis of their experience of other structures in the TL. Secondly, ignorance of rule restrictions: occurring as a result of failure to observe the restrictions or existing structures. It is application of rules to contexts where they do not apply. Thirdly, incomplete application of rules: arising when the learner fails to fully develop a certain structure required to produce acceptable sentences. Fourthly, false concepts hypothesized: deriving from faulty comprehension of distinctions in the TL.

Intralingual errors have other subcategories such as Hyperextension and faulty categorization (Keshavarz, 1999). Taylor (1975) argued that a large proportion of L_2 learners "can be explained only within the target language itself" (p.86).

Types of Interlingual errors

Krashen (1988) has claimed that L_1 interference seems to be strongest in EFL settings rather than ESL ones.

Steinbach (1978) has categorized two types of Interference. Interlingual interference which occurs due to the negative transfer of L₁ patterns into the TL and Intralingual interference which happens by the overgeneralization of linguistic patterns within the TL.

Literature review

Dulay and Burt (1973) collected speech samples from 179 Spanish -speaking children learning English with varying amounts of English-as-second language instruction in three different areas in the united states . They classified errors into three different areas; as being either interference, intralingual, or unique. The results were surprising. Of the 513 unambiguous errors, only about 5% were interference errors, while 87% were intralingual and the remainder was classified as unique. They interpreted this finding as evidence that children do not apply their L₁ structures in the process of learning the syntax of the TL. On the other hand, Duškova (1969) analyzed errors made in English compositions by adult Czechoslovakians and reported that almost 30% of the 1007 collected errors were interlingual and the remainder were intralingual. The results of his study revealed that many interference errors were omissions of articles, a part of speech which is absent in Czech. Corder (1975), citing Duškova, reported that there was a larger portion of interference errors for adults than what Dulay and Burt found. In Dulay and Burt analysis (1973), omissions of articles were considered intralingual errors, since children also omit articles.

Kelliny (1994) in his study concluded that the main source of grammatical errors was interference of the L₁ patterns. Researchers (Jaszczolt, 1995; Taylor, 1975) have found that the early stages of language learning are influenced by a predominance of L₁ interference while the later stages are characterized by more intralingual transfer. It has been supported through out literature that in the early stages, analogy (overgeneralization) contributes little to errors while L₁ interference is more active, and in the later stages, intralingual or analogy is more active (Tajadini Rabori,2002). Schwartz and Sprouse (1996) have proposed that a learner will rely on his/her entire L₁ when initial learning starts. Gradually, the learner will replace aspects of the TL when s/he determines which aspects of the foreign language are different from his/her L₁ and those aspects that are similar will remain. A review by Dulay, Hernandez-Chavez and Burt (1978) of the literature on child L₂ acquisition ended with these conclusions: first, as time passes, children stop relying on their L₁ in order to process the second system of the new language, gradually increasing their reliance on the TL phonological system; therefore the traces of their L₁ largely disappear. Second, most adults never cease to rely on their L₁ sound system.

Delleman (2008) by take a look on the EA literature has concluded that as learning continues, the learner's reliance on L₁ will reduce and as his/her IL develops, the representation of the TL would include more features of the TL than of his/her L₁ and therefore interference will reduce.

Research questions

1. Are there any significant differences between EFL lower intermediate and advanced learners' sources of errors?
2. Are there any significant differences between the two proficiency groups' types of intralingual errors?

Methodology

Subjects

Two groups of participants were involved in this study. The first groups were 80 advanced English learners of Simin institute in Kerman. All of them had already received an average of three years of formal instruction in English up to FCE (First Certificate in English) level. In order to have more

homogeneous participants, those learners whose mid-term grades were above 15 out of the total grade 30 were selected and the other with lower grades were distracted. The second group were 80 (lower) intermediate English learners of the same institute. They had already passed three semesters up to COMB1 (combination 1) level.

The rationale behind the selection of these two groups of English learners is that it is usually difficult for the learners who are lower than COMB1 level to speak English; they use formulaic speech, they have not yet begun to construct a true IL. They avoid taking part in conversations. On the other hand, the advanced learners who had already experienced making errors and being corrected can provide a good sample of the proficient learners' types of errors.

Instruments

The researcher made an audio-recording of the learners' performance in order to identify their sources of errors. The researcher collected samples of English speech rather than written English on the account that speaking will reveal the real competence of learners, due to the fact that it limits the time the subjects have to reflect on the problem and revise the utterances. The more time that learners have to plan; the more regular their production is likely to be. Learners' true IL emerges when they are dedicating the least attention to analyzing language forms and therefore finding the sources of errors in this way would be more reliable.

Data collection procedure

The data was collected through a ten-hour recording of the subjects' performance (five-hour recording of the advanced & five-hour recording of the intermediate learners) by using 'spontaneous procedures', in which unmonitored conversations and interviews are used, the learner's attention should be focused on the content rather than the form, and it should include variety of topics. Based on this, here it was attempted to select topics that can tap learners' interest and to reveal their linguistic output. The subjects were asked to have an unmonitored conversation for six to seven minutes about their personal information; future plans and other topics. The recorded tapes were later transcribed and their conversations were put under careful analysis. The sources of errors were extracted and put under certain categories.

Data Analysis procedure

The data of the study is transcribed and then analyzed by means of descriptive statistics (frequency & percentage) and chi-square test, using the SPSS software.

Based on the results of the audio-recording analysis of the learners' errors, the intermediate learners made a total of 3360 errors while the advanced learners committed a total of 753 errors. The main error patterns of intermediate and advanced learners are extracted and their sources are identified based on the comparison between English and Farsi. Intermediate learners' main errors are summarized as follows:

- 1) Omission of indefinite articles due to L₁ interference 25.2%
- 2) Applying wrong verb tenses due to L₁ interference 10.2%
- 3) Lack of subject-verb agreement due to intralingual factors 8.18%
- 4) Preposition omission due to L₁ interference 5.95%
- 5) Preposition substitution due to bi-source factors (both L₁ and L₂) 5.35%

And advance learners' major errors are:

- 1) Addition of definite article due to intralingual factors (overgeneralization) 22.5%
- 2) Preposition substitution due to L₁ interference 13.2%
- 3) Preposition substitution due to bi-source factors 10.6%

In table 1, the intermediate and advanced learners' errors are contrasted. It reveals that there are significance differences between the two proficiency groups' sources of errors.

Table 1

Count		level		Total
		inter	adv	
Q.4	inter	1650	220	1870
	intra	1000	400	1400
	bi.s	460	100	560
Total		3110	720	3830

Chi-Square Tests

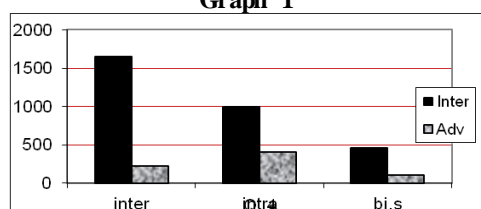
	Value	df	Asy mp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	148.528 ^a	2	.000

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 105.27.

"inter" stands for interlingual

"intra" stands for intralingual

"bi.s" stands for bi.source

Graph 1

The intermediate learners mostly committed interlingual errors while most advanced learners committed intralingual errors. The differences can be seen among the other categories too.

In table 2, the intermediate and advanced learners' types of intralingual errors are contrasted. It reveals that there are significance differences between the two proficiency groups' types of interlingual errors.

Table 2

Count		level		Total
		inter	adv	
Q.5	over	795	310	1105
	fc	20	20	40
	iar	185	70	255
Total		1000	400	1400

Chi-Square Tests

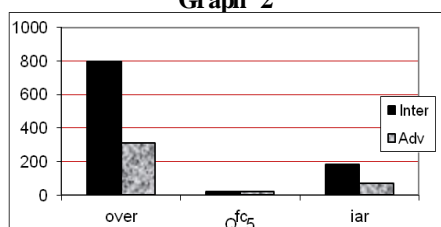
	Value	df	Asy mp. Sig. (2-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	9.302 ^a	2	.010

a. 0 cells (.0%) have expected count less than 5. The minimum expected count is 11.43.

"over" stands for overgeneralization

"fc" stands for faulty categorization

"iar" stands for incomplete application of rules (undergeneralization)

Graph 2

According to table 2, the chi-square value is 9.302 which is significant at .010. It means that there are meaningful differences between the intermediate and advanced learners' types of intralingual errors. Generally speaking there is no difference between their types of intralingual errors, but considering the details, the related graph shows that the intermediate learners committed much more overgeneralization and undergeneralization (incomplete application of rules) errors than the advanced learners, while both groups had equal faulty categorization errors.

Discussion

According to the tables, there are significant differences between the two proficiency groups' sources of errors. The intermediate learners committed many interlingual errors while the advanced learners made more intralingual errors than interlingual ones. Both groups committed fewer bi-source errors in comparison with the other types of errors. This validates what Nemser (1971) mentioned. He has maintained that, in the early stages, a language learner does not differentiate properly the features of his/her L₁ and the TL, but in the later stages, after learning the distribution of some of the formal elements, the learner extends the distribution and commits errors. The latter stages are characterized by reinterpretation, hypercorrection and analogy. It is also in line with what Selinker (1972) concluded. He concluded that a beginner in the process of learning a foreign language develops an IL which is close to his/her native competence; conversely, an advanced learner's IL must be closer to the TL competence.

It should be pointed out that although the advanced learners committed more intralingual errors than the interlingual ones, they also made many interlingual errors. Paradowski (2007) has maintained that L₁ is a powerful factor in learning another language which its incidence is not only circumscribed to the lower levels of proficiency. The findings more or less confirm what Kellerman (1984) claimed, that is, advanced learners are equally effected by L₁ interference as are beginners. The only difference is that beginners tend to show it more overtly in their syntax whereas advanced learners tend to show it in less obvious ways, for example through subtle semantic errors or through the use of avoidance strategies.

The results of the analysis also show that there are meaningful differences between the frequencies of the types of intralingual errors committed by learners. The intermediate learners made so many overgeneralization errors, 795 errors out of 1000 ones, and they committed 185 undergeneralization errors. Out of 400 intralingual errors committed by the advanced learners, there were 310 overgeneralization and 70 undergeneralization errors. Although at first glance it seems that there is no difference between these two groups, table 2 shows that there is such a different. The intermediate learners committed much more errors than the advanced ones in each category. In both groups, most of the intralingual errors were due to overgeneralization of language rules. The intermediate learners committed many overgeneralization errors. Such errors are evidence of their making hypotheses. As Taylor (1975) maintained, learners use overgeneralization strategy to simplify and regularize the linguistic complexities of the TL.

Another important finding is that out of 3360 errors committed by the intermediate learners, 250 errors could not be identified as interlingual, intralingual or bi-source errors. These errors are assumed to belong to the idiosyncratic category, that is the learner's language is unique to a particular individual and the grammar of this language is peculiar to that individual alone. Out of 753 errors committed by the advanced participants, 33 errors can be identified as the idiosyncratic errors, too.

Conclusion

EFL learners resort to different strategies to overcome their learning problems. Learners commit errors mainly because their language proficiency is not good enough for them to use the TL at will. In order to fill the gap between inadequate proficiency and tough requirements of a task, language learner apply different strategies such as avoidance, L₁ interference, undergeneralization, overgeneralization, etc. (Richards, 1971b) in their IL system which cause to different types of errors. One of the strategies typical of foreign language learners is L₁ interference. When the learner is learning to speak the TL, the deeply ingrained patterns of his/her L₁ will interfere with those of the TL. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that the early stages of Iranian language learning are influenced by a predominance of L₁ interference while the later stages are characterized by more intralingual transfer. This is in line with what Taylor (1975) found that beginners make more interference errors than intermediate ones. In the basic stages, learners should focus on the grammar courses which lay a foundation for them to produce correct utterances. The findings of the analysis show that even the advanced learners made many interlingual errors, it supports what Butzkamm (2008) has concluded. He has maintained that teachers can banish the learners' L₁ from the classroom, but they cannot banish it from the learners' minds. It is impossible since it would mean stopping them thinking altogether. Nowadays it is generally accepted that L₁ interference can function as a learning or communication strategy (Paradowski, 2007). The participants of the study committed many intralingual errors too. EFL learners cut down the complexity of task involved in sentence production, which results in errors. At intermediate and advanced levels, learners' previous experience and existing subsumes begin to influence structures within the TL. They have reached a stage where they can make generalizations based on the TL itself (Taylor, 1975). Jain (1974) maintained that both the child acquiring his/her L₁ and the adult learning a TL, the learning strategy to reduce speech to a simpler system is employed by every learner. EFL learners, especially beginners, try to simplify their expressions by omitting certain items such as articles, prepositions, etc, and finally reducing some linguistic forms to more simple forms.

In addition to interlingual, intralingual and bi-source errors, EFL learners commit idiosyncratic errors which are peculiar to each individual alone. They cannot be judged against the norms of the TL, nor compared with the L₁. They may be influenced by other individual factors such as anxiety, negative transfer of training, etc.

Implications

Theoretical implications

This study tries to bear significant applications both theoretically and pedagogically. Theoretically, the findings of the study will reveal the nature of the IL of Iranian EFL learners at different levels of proficiency and the way of their IL development. The factors which influence the IL systems of the learners and the processes and strategies which are used by learners in learning English will be detected.

Implications for language teachers

From the practical point of view, the findings will inform English teachers how to begin teaching, where to emphasize and how to proceed. Through studying the sources of the learner, the teacher may have a clear concept of the nature of the learner's interim language. If teachers find out that learners cannot achieve native speaker's competence directly, they would be ready to accept the varieties of language which their learners produce. The findings of the study indicates in which areas their

learners' languages are influenced mostly by their L₁ and they can focus on the errors committed at this stage and provide more practice and examples on that area.

Implications for text book writers

The results of the study may contribute material designers to develop the most suitable textbooks with necessary emphasis, additional exercises, and the logic mode of presentation and organization.

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