

The Influence of First Language on Foreign Language Learning: An Error Analysis of Morphemes

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Abstract

The present paper is an Error analysis aims at to document the errors that appear in a learner language, determine whether those errors are systematic, and (if possible) explain what caused them. The study employed one hour-interview conducted with a student of High Institute of Comparative and Administrative Studies in Cairo. The interview was conducted in a classroom in the main campus building at the American University in Cairo. The study found that most of these errors are products of overuse "overgeneralization" of L2's rules, and NL transfers. Learners need to be encouraged to speak and interact in English at home and with their friends for more progress in fluency. However, focus on rule is also pivotal for adequate balance between fluency and accuracy.

Keywords: Error Analysis, English, learner

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1. Introduction

In the field of pedagogy, there have been different schools of thought with regards to learner's errors. One of these schools maintains that, if we were to achieve a perfect teaching method, committing errors should be avoided in the first place, and therefore the occurrence of errors is merely a sign of inadequacy of our teaching techniques. The second school holds that we are in imperfect world and as a result of this errors are unavoidable phenomenon despite our best efforts. Therefore, our ingenuity should be focused on techniques for dealing with errors after their occurrence. (Richards ,J.C, 2014). Indeed, errors should be considered as challenges rather than unforgivable sins for the great roles of error analysis in linguistics and language teaching have become apparent. According to Gass's philosophy of SL acquisition, errors should not be seen as a result of imperfect learning, they are to be considered as evidence of the state of a learner's knowledge of the L2. Indeed, they are to be viewed as indication of a learner's attempt to pinpoint some system.(Gass & Selinker, 2001). Indeed, learner's errors can be a strategy when learning second language. A learner's errors are significant in three different ways. First to the teacher, in that they tell him, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and, consequently, what remains for him to learn. Second, they provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language. Thirdly, they are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn (Corder, S.Pit. 1981)

2. Source of Errors

It is very important here to differentiate between "errors" and "mistakes". Both Corder (1967,1971) and James (1998) gave a criterion that would help in distinguishing between the two terms. "Mistakes are said to be slips of tongue; they are generally one-time events and can be recognized and corrected by the speaker. However, errors are systematic; they are likely to occurred repeatedly. Moreover, errors are not likely to be recognized by the learner, it's only the teacher or researcher would locate them. (Gass & Selinker, 2001). Moreover, it is apparent that level of difficulty varies between native speakers (NS) who think in the language used and non-native speakers (NNS) who need to think, of course, about all rules they need to employ, the rules that native speakers apply naturally. Thus, non-native speakers are more to make mistakes or commit errors when trying to make themselves understood. From here,

Richards sheds light on some basic sources of "error":

1. Language transfer
2. Interlingua Interference
3. Overgeneralization, and
4. Leaning strategies.

Richards claimed that the learning strategy to reduce speech to a similar system seems to be employed by every learner; both the native child and the second language learners have a "telegraphic" stage. This is often affected by "overgeneralization", she claimed. (Richards, J.C., 1974)

3. The Subject Description/ Data Collection

The study employed one hour-interview conducted with a student of High Institute of Comparative and Administrative Studies in Cairo late February. The interview was done in a classroom in the main campus building at the American University in Cairo. The student was a 19 years old Egyptian. He attended a preparatory course in English; however, Arabic is the main medium instruction of his institute. Our subject is guy motivated and fluent. According to him, he was influenced by one of his relatives who mastered English language; this informal language interaction has played a great role on him.

Moreover, it worth to be mentioned here that two students had been interviewed before our subject, the products of the interviewed did not meet the criterion in this interview, three aspects of morphology were focused: Simple past, Plural, and articles; however, my errors analysis will be focused on two out of these aspects (simple past, and articles) for these are the most erroneous features of our subject's communication. Furthermore, the sources of this student's communication's errors will be predicted and discussed; some pedagogical suggestions, which might help in overcoming these deficiencies, will be made.

4.Errors Identification and Categorization:

In general, it appears from the data bellow that our subject is endowed with grammatical features, although, some aspects still need to be reformed. Here is the data quantification of his production.

	Data quantification				Accurate Percentage
	Native like	non-native like	Ambiguous	Total	
Indefinite Article	92	33	2	127	72.4%
Definite Article	177	3	7	187	94.6%
Zero Article	2	42		44	4.5%
Past Tense	402	72	3	477	84.2%
Plurals	119	43		162	73.4%

Past Tense Analysis

Going through our subject's utilization of *past tense*, it is Current that he was able to produce 72.4% of the tense (simple past) accurately.

Morpheme	Total	Native-like	Non native-like	Ambiguous	Percentage of Accuracy
Past-Tense	477	402	72	3	84.2%

After the initial analysis, the tenses were divided to three categories: 1) regular, 2) irregular and 3) *Copula Verbs*. The native-like and non-native-like productions of our subjects are shown beneath.

	Total Used	Native like/ Percentage	Non-native-like/Percentage
Regular Verbs	84	69= 82.1%	15=17.8%
Irregular Verbs	190	151 =79.4	39 20.5%
Copula	141	129=91.4%	12 8.5%
Auxiliary: Can, Do, and, Have	71	65 90.9%	6 9.1%

Regular Verbs

	Total Used	Native like/ Percentage	Non-native-like/ Percentage
Regular Verbs	84	69 82.1%	15 17.8%

From the above regular verbs' utilization, I can infer that our subject has a good control of the pattern "regular verbs". Out of the 84 utterances, the "native-likes" occupied 82.1% while the "non-native" scored just 17.8%. Now, what are the sources of these erroneous productions? First, it's vital to remember that the student primary source of his English ability is through interactions with his uncle who mastered English. I can infer some SLA a hypothesis from the student's perforce.

1. Language Transfer. According to Gass & Silinker, "language transfer is a technical term that denoting the positive' interaction of two or more similar areas of language or languages resulting in 'correct linguistic output, or denoting the negative interaction of two or more areas of language or languages resulting in incorrect linguistic output (Dechert & Raupahc, 1989). From my own opinion, I think our subject was trying to transfer a **phonology** phenomenon of his NL (Arabic) to the SL (English). "**Assimilation**", in standard Arabic, IS applied when two Similar sounds precede each other, c.g. d, and o as One can see in numbers 116, 235, and 739.

116: But I dream that. (But I dreamed **that**.)

234: I open the door. (T opened **the** door)

739: I discover that I have emmm.. colour-blind. (I discovered **that** I have.)

2- I guess that the subject uttered the verbs dream, and discover correctly with morpheme (ed.), dreamed, opened, and, discovered, assimilation of the ending sound **d** to the following initial sound (th/ ð deceived his utterances, this seems to be systematic to me. Furthermore, what happened to the verb “**taached**” in both numbers 323, and 351 seems to be overgeneralization of ‘ed.’ Morpheme’s role.

2 – Irregular Verbs

	Total Used	Native like/ Percentage	Non native-like/ Percentage
Irregular	190	151 = 79.4%	39 = 20.5%

I am unable to pinpoint any systematic variation in our subject uses of irregular verb. The gap between his native-like utterances of **regular** and **irregular** verbs seems to be unmarked, the gap was very tight for he accurately produced 79.4% of irregular verbs accurately while the regulars hold 82.1%. However, it appeared to me that the student was unable to comprehend the roles that govern some of irregular verbs; he used them interchangeably in some cases. Let us take glance to these examples:

447 – We I Known a lot of girls

567 – I wasn’t Knew where I am

577 – but he didn’t knew anything about

Moreover, he also used the verb “**go**” in **simple past** contexts. Perhaps, unavailability of irregular verb in Arabic influenced some of his productions.

3-Copula

	Total Used	Native like/ Percentage	Non native-like/ Percentage
Copula	141	129=91.4%%	12 8.5%

From the data above, it is apparent that our subject was able to control copula excellently; the accurate productions scored 91.4% why the non native-likes of his utterance scored 8.5%. One can infer free variations in his inter-language context. When analyzing the data, I found that the student omitted copula in number 247 only and produced it, although incorrect, in number 310 as we can see below.

247: He very, very funny (omitted)

310: He's very, very very first beginning. (Produced incorrectly).

It worth to be mention that despite the unavailability of copula (verb to be) in Arabic language, our subject utilized it meritoriously. Perhaps this happened because of the frequency of copula in communication. Moreover, Kleinman hypothesis of SL acquisition is also applicable to this situation. He claimed that when the difference in forms between NL and TG is obvious, this would lead to the saliency of the form(s) in the TL input. In other words, the difference between L1 and L2 forms ease the input. (Gass, and Selinker, 2001)

Articles

Articles were divided into three categories as appear below: **zero articles, indefinite, and** definite. Each of these categories will be analyzed independently.

Data Quantification

	Native-Like		non-native		Ambiguous		Total
	n	%	n	%	n	%	
Zero Article	5		38	88.4%	-	-	43
Indefinite	91		35	27.3%	2	2.6%	128
Define	187	11.6%	3	1.5%	8	4%	198

Article
 Articles
 Past Tense

1-1 The Zero Article (Modified) Percentage

Total Use	Native-Like	Non-native-Like
21	23.8%	76.19%

1-2 The Zero Article (Non-Modified) Percentage

Total Use	Native-Like	Non-native-Like
22	0%	100%

One of the main problematic angles for our subject is the production of zero article contexts as one can see in the above data. Out his 43 productions, 11.6% appeared to be native-like while the rest 88.4% were incorrectly produced. From my own view, I think the native language affected the student since Zero articles are uncommon in Arabic language. Therefore, we can see that our subject interchanged the context. Numbers 35, 78, 85, 276 are some examples to back my claim.

35: The secondary school

78: In the secondary school

85: In secondary school

276: But When I was in secondary school.

Although he was able to use it correct with some modified nouns thus he scored 23.8% in Modified noun contexts, and scored nothing in non-modified contexts, his pattern still seems to me to be unsystematic.

2-1 The Indefinite Article (Modified) Percentage

Total Use	Native-Like	Non-native-Like
75	68%	32%

2-2 The Indefinite Article (Non-Modified) Percentage

Total Use	Native-Like	Non-native-Like
51	78.4%	21.6%

Our subject apparently demonstrated a good command of indefinite articles (a, and an) here. Out of 128 indefinite manipulated, 71.1% of them were native-like. When comparing the usage with modified and non-modified nouns, just a narrow gap was found. With modified nouns, 68% were produced native-like while 78.4% were 78.4% were accurately produced with non-modified nouns. Here the situation contradicted with the zero article productions where the subject performed badly in non-modified noun contexts. It is vital to mention here that I am somehow disagree with a claim that unavailability of indefinite article in Arabic affects Arabic learners of English language. We have to remember that if indefinite article does not exist, nunation in Arabic is a sign of indefinite. There is difference between *Rajulun*, and *Rajul*; the first (*Rajulun*) with **nunation** denotes a man while the second (*Rajul*) denotes man. From here I can guess that knowing that there is a sign which denotes indefinite in Arabic (**nunation**) helped our subject to perform better in his utilization of indefinite article(s) (a, an) of English than he did in zero article contexts.

3-1 The Definite Article (Modified) Percentage

Total Use	Native-Like	Non-native-Like
87	97.7%	2.3%

3-3 The Definite Article (Non-Modified) Percentage

Total Use	Native-Like	Non-native-Like
103	99%%	1%

Looking into the definite articles context I found that our subject performed excellent, I am unable to find on which rationale he was able to do this. If we were to interpret this finding from error analysis perspective, one can conclude that the student has control over definite articles. 94.4% of his utterances were native-likes. Moreover, if we compare between his uses of definite article with modified and non-modified noun phrases, one would find that there is no gap worth to be mentioned. One can conclude that the rest 5.6% are not errors, rather they are slips of tongue which known as "mistakes".

Pedagogical Implications

"We cannot really teach language, we can only create conditions in which it will develop spontaneously in the mind in its own way" Von Humboldt (Richards, J.C, 1974) also see (Rekha A, 1992), We need to keep this hypothesis in mind in our language instruction contexts.

Our subject, from my own point of view, faces two major problems in his oral English productions. Language transfer, I mean application of L1 (Arabic) to L2 (English), and Overgeneralization of rules in the L2. In order to help our subject overcome these deficiencies, the following pedagogy needs to be established.

1-Simple Past Errors

For a good communication to take place, grammatical competence is of necessary thus it's one of the important dimensions of language, which are interconnected. See (Brown, H.D. 1994). The interview obviates lack of grammatical rules' exposure in our subject SL ability. It seems to me that he is fluent; the main angle needs to be focused is forms especially irregular verbs. Surprisingly, the verb "**TO BE**", which seems to be the most difficult kinds of irregular verbs, because it forms are different depending on the subject, was accurately produced by our subject. I think what is necessary here is to expose him to other simpler types of irregular verbs. 1) Verbs which don't change (**cut-cut, hit-hit, fit-fit...**), 2) verbs which their vowels (**get-got, sit-sat, drink-drank..**), and 3) verbs which change completely (**catch-caught, bring-brought, teach-taught...**). A data consist theses verbs may be provided for a meaningful exposure. Student(s) may be asked to tell a story with the instructor writing the erroneous verb on the blackboard for a proper feedback. After the exposure, multiple-choice quizzes may be given to determine the learner(s)'s understanding of the verbs

2- Articles

It was clear that the way the indefinite is marked in English is quiet different from they way it is marked in Arabic. While "a" or "an" is used in English, "nunation" of noun stand as indefinite marker in Arabic. Here, translation from the native language (Arabic) into L2 (English) can be accommodated thus the system does not correspond in the L1, and L2. Furthermore, students can be introduced to the uses of articles through meaningful and comprehensive activities. Description essay or oral narrative activities can be manipulated. Besides, fill-in-the gaps exercises can be use in dialogs. In sum, variability that denotes teaching of grammar need to be

considered, e.g. age, proficiency, level of education, and learners' backgrounds (Brown, H.D, 1994) and (Schwieter J.W, 2014),

5. Other Influential Factors

According to Richards (1974), there are other factors, beside systematic and non-systematic errors, that may account for learner's errors. The learner likely to be affected by other outside factors e.g. Psychological conditions such as intense excitement, and/ or physical factors such as tiredness which are not permanent phenomenon (XIE Fang, JIANG Xue-mei, 2007) . However from pedagogical views, one may dismiss these as "mistakes" as happened in the **definite articles** error analysis.

6. Conclusion

Humans are not only imperfect in committing language errors themselves; they also err in their judgments of other's errors for no one is perfect. Therefore, this study is an attempt to identify, describe, categories, and analyses the errors in oral English production of an Arabic-speaking student. The study found that most of these errors are products of overuse "**overgeneralization**" of L2's rules, and **NL transfers**. Learners need to be encouraged to speak and interact in English at home and with their friends for more progress in fluency. However, focus on rule is also pivotal for adequate balance between fluency and accuracy. The study confirms that, learner's errors are significant in three different ways: the teacher will be aware, if he undertakes a systematic analysis, how far towards the goal the learner has progressed and what remains for him to learn. In addition, learner's errors provide to the researcher evidence of how language is learned or acquired, what strategies or procedures the learner is employing in the discovery of the language. Indeed, errors are indispensable to the learner himself, because we can regard the making of errors as a device the learner uses in order to learn.

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