



Is Native Language a Source of Errors Made by Persian- and Turkish-Speaking Learners of English?

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Abstract

This study is going to investigate errors explored in English composition of Persian- and Turkish-speaking learners of English. Furthermore, it is going to identify if the source of errors can be traced back to the native language of the learners. To do so, 40 Persian learners of English and 40 Turkish learners of English participated in the study. Elicitation test was the instrument used in this study. The participants were asked to write composition on the pictures presented to them. Then, the errors were extracted according to surface strategy taxonomy. The analyzed data showed that Turkish participants made more errors than Persian participants but this finding was not found significant according to statistical procedure, Chi-square. Therefore, native language of the participants cannot be considered as the source of the errors they made.

Key words: Native language; Error; English-learning; Persian-speaking; Turkish-speaking

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INTRODUCTION

Errors are an inevitable part of learning and constitute a natural process in maturation of learning a language. Analyzing errors can help change teaching material. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) state that studying learners' errors serves two major purposes: 1) It provides data from which inferences about the nature of language learning process can be made; 2) It indicates to teachers and curriculum developers which part of the target language is the most problematic and which error types detract most from the learner's ability to communicate effectively. Moreover, such studies help the teacher select the appropriate teaching strategies. The study of learners' errors has been a primary focus of L2 research during the last decades. Since S. Pit Corder's initial arguments for the significance of learners' errors appeared in the winter 1967 issue of the *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, researchers and teachers in numerous countries have spent countless hours extracting errors from student compositions, submitting them to close scrutiny, and using them as a base for theory construction and classroom practice (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study is going to investigate the errors made in the writing of Persian- and Turkish- speaking learners of English. The errors and their frequencies will be compared and contrasted to see if the source of errors can be attributed to the native language of the learners that is Persian and Turkish. According to the objective of the study the following research question can be raised.

- Do English learners regardless of their native language make similar linguistic errors?

According to the above-mentioned question, the following hypothesis can be set up:

- English learners regardless of their native language make similar linguistic errors.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

Error analysis was conceptualized and applied based on the behaviorist theory of language learning which implied that errors were signs that a language learner had simply not learnt the rules of the target language effectively. In the early 1950's, the notion of language as a system, and more importantly, the notion of second language acquisition as the meeting of two language systems gained more acceptance and linguists began to regard errors as evidence of language transfer, or what Weinreich (1953) referred to as inter-systemic interference (Richards, 1974). With this conceptualization, errors were regarded as the manifestation of ineffective language learning and were focused upon by linguists and teachers intent on their elimination.

As an integral part of contrastive analysis, error analysis was used predominantly to help language teachers predict what problems a language learner would have due to the linguistic differences between the learner's native language and the target language. Errors that could not be attributed to language interference were virtually ignored and those most frequently focused upon, such as the omission of articles before unique nouns or phonological errors, were so well known that many teachers found the work of the researchers redundant. Thus, in the beginning, error analysis consisted of little more than impressionistic collections of 'common' errors and their linguistic classification (Ellis, 1985).

Moreover, as the value of error analysis in pedagogy became more apparent, it was applied primarily to language teaching known as the audiolingual or fundamental skills method, in line with behaviorist theories of language learning. Effective teachers focused on the areas of language where their students were likely to have problems and attempted to prevent or postpone as long as possible the development of a linguistic system marked by errors (Nemser, 1971). In this light, it can be said that error analysis was applied more to teaching methodology than to identifying weaknesses in second language learning.

Richards (1974) believes that error analysis has yielded insights into the L2 acquisition process that have stimulated major changes in teaching practices. Perhaps its most controversial contribution has been the discovery that the majority of the grammatical errors second language learners make do not reflect the learners mother tongue but are very much like those young children make as they learn a first language. Researchers have found that like L1 learners' errors, most of the errors L2 learners make indicate they are gradually building an L2 rule system.

It wasn't until the late 1960's that researchers like Slamenka and Ceraso used evidence gained through error analysis to discredit the existence of negative transfer as the dominant factor in acquiring a second

language, since many errors could not be attributed to inter-systemic interference. What they and other researchers were demonstrating was that learners didn't just memorize target language rules and use them to form their own utterances: they were constructing their own rules based on the input they had received. Hence, there was a rebirth of error analysis and a movement from an undifferentiated world to a world organized by mind, from a world of instances to a world related by generalities and abstractions requiring the whole concept to be redefined and approached from a more cognitive or mentalist perspective (Wilkinson and Burrill, 1990).

In addition, psychology became a much more influential field for linguists interested in using error analysis as a diagnostic tool, to help identify the causes of errors. The term error itself was redefined in recognition that many mistakes in spontaneous speaking or writing could be attributed to a simple pause, metanalysis, or a slip of brain (Crystal, 1980). Such errors of performance are unsystematic and do not reflect a defect in the knowledge of the target language. They do, however, provide complementary information to that gained from analyzing systematic errors which reflect the language learners' competence. Strevens (1969) and others further contributed to the reconceptualization of errors by hypothesizing that errors shouldn't be viewed as problems to overcome, but rather as normal and inevitable features of language learning indicating the strategies that learners use. Errors began to help describe and explain the way in which learners learned a language rather than their progress towards conforming to a set of real or imagined standards of expression and thus, had a more positive role (Crystal, 1980).

Moreover, Richards (1974) states that sometimes researchers distinguish between errors caused by factors such as fatigue and inattention (what Chomsky, 1965, called 'performance' factors) and, errors resulting from lack of knowledge of the rules of the language (what Chomsky, 1965, called 'competence'). In some of the second language literature, performance errors have been called 'mistakes' while the term 'error' was reserved for the systematic deviations due to the learners' still developing knowledge of the L2 rule system (Corder, 1967). The distinction between performance and competence errors is extremely important, but it is often difficult to determine the nature of a deviation without careful analysis. In order to facilitate reference to deviations that have not yet been classified as performance or competence errors, Richards (1974) doesn't restrict the term 'error' to competence based deviations. He uses 'error' to refer to any deviation from a selected norm of language performance, no matter what the characteristics or causes of the deviation might be.

Today, error analysis is used with a variety of techniques for identifying, classifying and systematically interpreting the mistakes made by language learners and

has helped support hypotheses such as the natural route of development, as well as identify the weaknesses and/or disprove theories of language learning like contrastive analysis throughout the last few decades. It is wholly true that a major problem of error analysis is that it is an imperfect tool: teachers and researchers have found it difficult to categorize error and even harder to explain its cause. Error analysis, like frequency, availability and high coverage analysis studies, is indeed an imperfect tool in that it is insufficient, imprecise and ill-defined. Despite these shortcomings, it is a useful tool for shedding light on the processes of language learning and for a number of other psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic studies. Errors are, after all, one of the most marked characteristics of sentences or utterances which deviate from the norm. Therefore, their presence as well as their noticeable absence have been used by researchers to classify different types of errors, linguistic varieties, as well as to explain the causes of the errors. Without errors, linguists and teachers would have very little upon which to base their understanding of language learning. Without error analysis, it would have been impossible to describe the language of the learner in its own right (Pinker, 1986).

To do error analysis, the first step is to collect samples of learner language. This has been done in various manners such as collecting samples in writing or taping conversations. The second step of error analysis is to identify the errors found in the language sample. Researchers agree that there are various levels of errors which are divided into two basic groups, surface structure and deep structure, or what Corder (1967) refers to as overt and covert errors. The third step in error analysis is to classify the errors according to their hypothesized causes. In the current study, surface structure was used to identify the errors based on the objective of the study.

Error Taxonomies

Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1989) limit their discussion to the descriptive aspects of error taxonomies on the assumption that the accurate description of errors is a separate activity from the task of inferring the sources of those errors. They have focused on error taxonomies that classify errors according to some observable surface feature of the error itself, without reference to its underlying cause or source. They have called these descriptive taxonomies. Error analysis, from this perspective, is an analytical tool, as are the specification of transitional constructions, the computation of acquisition orders, and the delineation of special utterance types. They have reviewed the literature in order to present the most useful and commonly used bases for the descriptive classification of errors. They are (1) linguistic category; (2) surface strategy; (3) comparative analysis; and (4) communicative effect. Discussion of these descriptive classifications is guided by two major purposes: to present error categories which rely solely on observable (rather

than inferred) characteristics for their definition; and to report the findings of research conducted to date with respect to error types observed. Such findings may assist teachers in their instructional efforts and theoreticians in their formulation of L2 theory.

Furthermore, many error taxonomies have been based on the linguistic item which is affected by an error. These linguistic taxonomies classify errors according to the language component and/or the particular linguistic constituent the error affects (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1989). Errors can be classified based on different taxonomies: Surface strategy taxonomy and Comparative taxonomy are two major linguistic taxonomies for classifying errors. Surface strategy taxonomy is the one used in the current study according to the objective of the study.

Surface Strategy Taxonomy

A surface strategy taxonomy highlights the ways surface structures are altered: Learners may omit necessary items or add unnecessary ones; they may misform items or misorder them. Researchers have noticed, however, that surface elements of a language are altered in specific and systematic ways. Analyzing errors from a surface strategy perspective holds much promise for researchers concerned with identifying cognitive processes that underlie the learner's reconstruction of the new language. It also makes us aware that learners' errors are based on some logic. They are not the result of laziness or sloppy thinking, but of the learner's use of interim principles to produce a new language (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1989). This taxonomy classifies errors as: Omission, Addition, Misformation, Regularization errors, Archi-forms, Alternating forms, and Misordering.

METHOD

Participants

Approximately 40 Persian- and 40 Turkish-speaking undergraduate university students, both male and female, majoring in English Translator Training and Teaching English participated in this study. All participants were the students of last year. The subjects were chosen according to their English language performance. That is, the students were chosen according to their Grade Point Average. The Persian-speaking students were selected from Shiraz Azad University and the Turkish-speaking students from Tabriz Azad University.

Instruments

The instrument used in this study was an Elicitation Test. The subjects were exposed to some pictures and asked to write a composition of their own choice based on what they perceived from the pictures. The pictures were related to U.S war against Iraq and Iranian traditional holidays called "Nouruz". Pictures about the war were

selected because the topic implied by the pictures was one of the most important issues of the day at the time of administering the test. The participants had naturally received a good amount of information on the topic by the media. So they had a sufficient amount of knowledge regarding the topic. The participants were also expected to have sufficient knowledge on the topic covered by the second set of pictures since Nourouz is the most important national holiday in Iran.

Procedure

The administration of the elicitation test took place in the Spring semester 2010. Data collection was done in a 2-hour session and the participants were asked to perform on the elicitation test. The students' linguistic errors extracted from the composition the students wrote on the pictures were calculated. Errors extracted from the compositions were linguistic errors including morphological, syntactic and semantic ones. The errors categorized and analyzed according to the error analysis model presented by Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982). This model categorizes and analyzes errors according to two error taxonomies i.e. surface strategy taxonomy and comparative taxonomy. However, only surface strategy taxonomy was considered for the current study according to the objectives of the study. Finally, the average frequency of errors for Persian- and Turkish-speaking EFL university students was calculated according to descriptive statistics. To gain more insight, chi-square was calculated when necessary.

In addition, the majority of the participants were so inspired by the pictures that they wrote more than one page about the topics. This indicates that the pictures had face-validity. Moreover, the pictures were presented to the students, and after 10 days the same pictures were presented to them again. The results of two tests showed a high correlation. It proved that the pictures were reliable.

RESULTS

To find answer to the research question and objective of the current study, descriptive statistics was used as the first statistical step and errors made by Persian- and Turkish-speaking learners of English were extracted and analyzed based on surface strategy taxonomy. As was explained before, errors are categorized into omission, addition, misordering and misformation errors based on this taxonomy. As depicted in Table 1, types of errors made by two different groups of learners in this study are somehow similar and equal. If sum up different types of omission, addition, misformation and misordering errors found in the writing of all participants of this study regardless of their native language, overall types of errors found in the learners' writing will be 27 types consist of 9 different type of omission errors, 7 different type of addition errors, 7 different type of misformation errors and 4 different type of misordering errors. Among 27 types of errors found

in collected data, only 2 types were made one time by the learners of English. These two types are misordering of adjective and misordering of auxiliary in embedded question while other types of errors were made by a remarkable number of learners. Some types of errors as omission of definite article, omission of indefinite article, omission of third person singular, addition of definite article, addition of plural marker, inappropriate noun phrase, inappropriate part of speech and verb-number disagreement were made by the majority of English learners apart from their native language.

Table 1
Frequency of Types of Errors Made by Turkish- and Persian-Speakers Learning English

Speakers	Errors	Omission	Addition	Misordering	Misformation
Persian-speakers	8	5	3	5	
Turkish-speakers	7	5	4	5	

Table 2 provides more detailed information. It indicates the overall number of occurrence of each type of errors in the writing of two different groups of learners in the current study. More detailed analysis of the findings in table 2 indicated that 0.77% of the errors were made one time and 99.33% were made more than one time by learners of English having different native languages of Turkish and Persian. The high percentage of errors made more than one time indicates that the errors occur in a systematic way. It is worth mentioning that only 4 types of errors were not found in the collected data. They are double markings, alternating form, archi form, and regularization errors. For the other 27 types of errors, many examples were found that match with collected data by other researchers such as Brown (1980) and Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982).

Table 2
Frequency of Errors Made by Turkish- and Persian-Speakers Learning English

Speakers	Errors	Omission	Addition	Misordering	Misformation
Persian-speakers	57	18	5	27	
Turkish-speakers	78	31	10	43	

It is interesting to pay attention to the relation among four surface strategy taxonomies that are errors of omission, addition, misformation and misordering. Total number of errors collected from 80 learners of English was 269. 135 out of 269 were omission errors (50.18%), 49 out of 269 were addition errors (18.21%), 70 out of 269 were misformation errors (26.02%), and 15 out of 269 were misordering errors (5.57%).

As depicted in Table 2, Turkish-speakers learning English made more errors in comparison with Persian-speakers learning English. However, it is not clear if this finding is significant according to statistical procedures

and can be referred to as a remarkable difference between two groups or not. To find if the difference between two groups of learners is statistically significant, Chi-square was run between errors made by Persian- and Turkish-speaking Students. The obtained χ^2 was 0.653. In comparison with the critical value of χ^2 provided by Hatch and Farhadi (1981) in 0.050 level of significance ($\chi^2= 7.81473$) it became clear that the difference between errors made by Persian- and Turkish-speaking learners of English is not significant. As was said before, it can be concluded that learners with different native languages made similar errors. Thus, errors can be attributed to the native language of learners. This finding confirms the hypothesis of the study which stated different learners with different native languages do make similar errors in learning English.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study gives more evidence in support of cognitive than behavioristic learning. Theoretically it confirmed error analysis to the effect that only a few number of errors can be traced back to the native language of learners, and rejects some components of contrastive analysis which claims that most of the errors are the result of positive transfer from native language of learners. In other words while contrastive analysis refers to the mother tongue as the only source of errors made by EFL learners, error analysis also pays attention to a category of errors which is not a reflection of the mother tongue, i.e. developmental errors. Thus, it may be the source and reason of the errors made by the learners which can be investigated more in future studies.

The present study indicated that the native language of learners should not be considered an obstacle to learn

a second language. In other words, errors are no longer regarded as negative points in the process of learning. They are the integrated parts of any learning which facilitate the learning process for both the learner and the teacher. This can also be of help for the teachers, curriculum planners, and text book compilers in revising the teaching materials.

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