

The Study of Morphological, Syntactic, and Semantic Errors Made by Native Speakers of Persian and English Children Learning English

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Abstract

This study tried to analyze the errors made by Persian-speaking learners of English and English children learning English as their mother tongue. The researcher analyzed errors according to surface strategy taxonomy rather than comparative taxonomy. To do this study, the researcher selected 40 homogenous Persian-speaking learners of English and administered an elicitation test to the participants. The instrument for elicitation test were two pictures one related to US war against Iraq and Nouroz as the most popular national holiday in Iran. The participants were asked to write an essay type composition based on their background knowledge about the pictures. Then, the errors in their writing were extracted and analyzed. Descriptive statistics and chi-square were used to analyze data. According to the results, no significant difference was found among errors made by Persian-speakers learning English and English children learning English as their mother tongue.

Key words: Morphological; Syntactic; Semantic; Native Speakers

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INTRODUCTION

Errors are the flawed side of learner's speech or writing. Dulay, Burt and Krashen (1982) believe that errors are the deviated parts of conversation or composition from the norms of mature language performance. Teachers now have found that making errors is an inevitable part of learning. They maintain that error analysis has stimulated major changes in teaching practices. The contrastive analysis treatment of errors, which was popular up through the 1960's, rested on a comparison of the learners native and target languages. Associationist or behaviourist view of learning prevalent at that time provided the theoretical justification for contrastive analysis. It holds that learning is basically a process of forming automatic habits and that errors should therefore result from first language habits interfering with the learners' attempt to learn new linguistic behaviors. It was thought that a contrastive analysis of the learners' two languages would predict the areas in the target language that would pose the most difficulty. Attentive teachers and researchers, however, noticed that a great number of students' errors could not possibly be traced to their native languages. For example, Hernandez-Chavez (Personal communication, December 12, 1972) stated that although Spanish plurals are formed almost exactly like English plurals, Spanish-speaking children still go through a plural-less stage as they learn English. This and other observations led to error analysis. Chomsky's "Review of B.F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior" (1959) questioned the very core of behaviorist habit theory as an account of language learning. Chomsky's generative linguistics, along with Piagetian psychology, subsequently succeeded in highlighting the previously neglected mental make up of learners as a central force in the learning process. As a consequence, Error Analysis came away with a rich source of explanation. The EA movement can be characterized as an attempt to account for learners' errors that could not be explained or predicted by CA or

behaviorist theory (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982).

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is to investigate the morphological, syntactic and semantic errors made by Persian-speaking learners of English and English children learning English as their mother tongue. Therefore, the study is going to find answer to the following question:

- Is there any resemblance between the errors made by EFL-learners and those made by English children learning their mother tongue?

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

- Errors made by Persian-speaking learners of English are very similar to those made by children learning English as their mother tongue.

To test this hypothesis, the surface strategy taxonomy and will be of avail.

REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

According to Bartholomae (1984), students do make errors in their writing. Some errors seem to the teacher to be the natural accompaniment of learning a new skill or the inevitable slips of the pen. Others seem intractable, persistent, resistant to instruction like an insect that has developed resistance to insecticide. Given the prestige society attaches to correctness in writing, teachers often feel duty-bound to note, mark, and correct every error in a student's paper then follow the papers with skills drills. This tremendous amount of time and effort is motivated by a healthy desire to "nip errors in the bud." Yet a wealth of research not only suggests that this approach to dealing with language error is ineffective, but also argues it may have a negative impact on writing ability generally because it destroys fluency.

Furthermore, two approaches are more effective. The first approach is to address problems in "correctness" as part of the editing stage in writing. Within the process approach, where students are writing pieces that are meaningful to them and that will find their way to an audience, students have a built in motivation to make their writing more correct. Teachers can capitalize on this motivation by teaching editing skills and points of usage in mini-lessons directed toward the written works in progress. In individual conferences or in small group lessons, students who share a common pattern of error can receive instruction in editing for the error and can coach each other in correcting their papers. For most students, this approach will be successful in improving the quality of papers, promoting transfer, and teaching a broader scope of linguistic knowledge than any other.

A further approach to error, often required for basic writers, is to analyze patterns of error in the writing of students with special difficulties. Error analysis

reveals that students with marked degrees of error do not make errors randomly. There is usually logic to the kinds of errors made, and that logic can provide the teacher with a window into the writer's understanding of language. Students who seem not to understand past tense inflections, for example, can be seen upon further inspection to use endings correctly when they follow certain consonant clusters. This tells the teacher that the error is more likely an error in dialect-influenced pronunciation than in knowledge about past tense endings. Students would then benefit from instruction in editing for this error alone until it becomes relatively automatic. The teacher would restrict her corrections for errors on papers to errors linked to the pattern the student is struggling with so as not to bury the pattern beneath too much "red ink." Although mini-lessons or focused instruction related to the "logic of error" in a student's written work are effective ways to address error, most researchers agree that these activities should not impede the ongoing process of writing. The greatest danger for students who are struggling for correctness in their writing is that correctness itself-hunting for mistakes, learning new rules, practicing drill skills, suffering poor evaluations comes to be the whole of writing. Students then have no opportunity to learn the more encompassing skills of generating ideas, finding form, and connecting with an audience. They also have little motivation to correct their errors outside of fear of failure, and that fear can lead to underdeveloped prose that avoids error by avoiding putting words down on paper. 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).

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. Many researchers use the linguistic taxonomy as a reporting tool which organizes the errors they have collected. Politzer and Ramirez (1973) studied 120 Mexican-American children learning English in the United States, taping their narrative of a short, silent animated cartoon. Errors were extracted for analysis from this body of natural speech. Burt and Kiparsky (1972) developed another linguistic taxonomy into which they classified several thousand English errors made by students learning English in foreign environment. 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 highlights the ways surface structures are altered. Analyzing errors from a surface strategy perspective makes us aware that learners' errors are based on some logic. They are not the result of laziness or sloppy thinking but of the learners' use of interim principles to produce a new language (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982). This taxonomy classifies errors as: Omission, Addition, Misformation and Misordering.

Omission: Omission errors are characterized by the absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance.

Addition: Three types of addition errors are double marking, regularization and simple addition.

Double marking: Double marking errors are described as the failure to delete certain items which are required in some linguistic construction, but not in others. For example, he didn't went instead of he didn't go.

Regularization is defined as applying a rule to the class of exceptions. For example, Sheeps instead of sheep.

Simple addition errors are the "grab bug" subcategory of additions. If an addition error is not a double marking nor a regularization, it is called a simple addition. For example, it is consist of instead of it consists of.

Misformation errors are characterized by the use of the wrong form of a morpheme or structure. Three type of misformation errors are regularization errors, archi-forms and alternating forms.

Regularization errors that fall under the misformation category are those in which a regular marker is used in place of an irregular one as runned for ran.

Archi-forms are one member of a class of forms selected by the learner to represent others in the class as that dog, that dogs.

Alternating forms: As the learners' vocabulary and grammar grow, the use of archi-forms often gives way to the free alternation of various members of a class with each other as those dog, this cats.

Misordering errors are characterized by the incorrect placement of a morpheme or group of morphemes in an

utterance. For example, *All the time in He is all the time late* is misordered.

Child Studies

In the first empirical study undertaken in which the grammatical errors made by children were actually counted and classified, less than 5% were found to reflect the children's first language (Dulay and Burt, 1974). Moreover, Venable (1974) lists a few possible Greek- and French-influenced errors. Another study (Gonzalez and Elijah, 1979) investigated errors in reading. Moreover, Venable (1974) lists a few possible Greek- and French-influenced errors. However, most studies tried to extract and analyze errors according to comparative taxonomy instead of surface strategy taxonomy.

The first published study that investigated the proportion of interlingual and developmental errors for L2 learners included three groups of Spanish-speaking children who were learning English in different parts of the United States. One group was in New York City school, and two were in California schools. Some 179 children, aged 5-8, were included in the sample. The children's speech was collected using a structured communication technique (The Bilingual Syntax Measure research version) which yields natural speech. The Bilingual Syntax Measure consists of a natural conversation between the child and the examiner about concrete things and events, guided by cartoon-type pictures and questions designed to elicit a range of target structures. The number and proportion of Developmental, Interlingual and Other errors were reported for 513 unambiguous errors and for each of the six syntactic structures represented in the data. Based on the results, 87.1% (447 out of 513) of the errors were Developmental, reflecting the same error types as those made by children learning English as a first language. On the other hand, 4.7% (24 out of 513) of the errors were interlingual, reflecting the structure of Spanish. Finally, 8.2% (42 out of 513) were Other, being neither of the types found in the published L1 literature nor reflective of the students' first language.

Ervin-Tripp (1974) reports that her English-speaking subjects misinterpreted French passives as actives even though the word order of French passives mirrors the English equivalents. The scattered incidence of interlingual errors is also reported in some other studies. Ravem (1968) mentions some instances of interlingual errors in *Yes/No* questions;

Like you me not, Reidun?

Adult Studies

Studies conducted on the speech and writing of adults learning second languages have also found that the majority of non-phonological errors adult learners make do not reflect their mother tongues. The proportion of interlingual errors that have been observed, however, is larger than that observed for children. The studies that

state actual proportions (White, 1977; and LoCoco, 1975) report an 8-23% incidence of interlingual errors in various samples. LoCoco (1976) and Bertkau (1974) noted that only a few individuals were responsible for most of the interlingual errors in their data. This observation indicates that characteristics unique to certain individuals may be closely related to the incidence of interlingual errors.

The two quasi-proportion studies (one on oral production, and the other on comprehension) report that virtually no interlingual errors were observed. One of them carried out by Hanania and Gradman (1977) concluded, "There was no evidence of marked first language interference in the learner's English sentence constructions" (p.88). The other one done by d'Anglejan and Tucker (1975) states,

Contrary to expectation, the second language learners... even those in the beginning group, appeared not to process the target sentences by relating them to similar structures in their native language... they do not attempt to apply language specific rules appropriate to their mother tongue to the interpretation of sentence in the target language (p.293).

In another study conducted by White (1977), twelve Spanish-speaking adults from Venezuela who were studying intensive English at Concordia University in Montreal were selected. The students had been exposed to eight months of study in Canada at the time the experiment was undertaken and fell into the intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency. Oral production data were elicited using the Bilingual Syntax Measure. Following the Dulay and Burt (1974) method, White classified and tallied Developmental, Interlingual and Other errors, excluding Ambiguous errors from the developmental and interlingual counts. A total of 541 errors were classified and grouped into 12 grammatical categories. Based on the results, 60.3% of the errors were classified as Developmental; 20.6% were classified as Interlingual; and 19% were classified as Other errors.

LoCoco made two investigations of adult second language acquisition in a foreign language environment. In her 1975 study, she examined the errors of native English-speaking students enrolled in Spanish and German classes at a university in Northern California. The data collected by asking the students to write a composition on a topic of their choice. Four written samples were obtained in this manner for the two groups of students (one studying German, the other Spanish) at different points during the quarter of language instruction they were receiving. Between 28 and 48 students were included for each language at each sampling. The first sample was taken three weeks after the beginning of the quarter, the last at the end of the quarter. LoCoco used error categories which were essentially subcategories of those used by the other proportion studies (e.g. White, 1977; Dulay and Burt, 1974). Based on the results, interlingual errors comprised, on the average, only 15.4% of the total errors, whereas developmental errors comprised 68.7%. LoCoco also

noted that only 25% of the German subjects contributed to the higher level obtained for interlingual errors. Similarly, Bertkau (1974) reports that only 3 of his 15 Japanese-speaking students were responsible for nearly all of the interlingual errors he observed.

In her second study, LoCoco (1976) again examined the errors of adults learning a second language in a foreign language environment. Her subjects were 28 English-speaking students taking an elementary Spanish course in a California university. The purpose of this study was to compare the effects on errors of three tasks used to elicit speech in the written mode: translation, picture description and composition. Again, in over a hundred errors classified, the incidence of interlingual errors was low, even lower than in the first study across all three tasks: 13.2% for translation, 13.0% for composition, and 8.3% for picture description.

METHOD

Participants

Approximately 40 Persian-speaking undergraduate university students, both male and female, majoring in English Translator Training and Teaching English participated in this study. They were all last year students. The subjects were chosen according to their performance in the English language. That is, the students were chosen according to their Grade Point Average. The obtained results compared to the collected data by Dulay, Burt and Krashen from English children learning English as their mother tongue.

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 and news on the topic by the media. So they had a sufficient amount of background 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

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 used due to the objectives of the present study. Then, the average frequency of errors for Persian-speaking EFL university students were 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

The data collected from the participants via the elicitation tests were carefully studied and the errors were extracted, and classified according to the surface strategy taxonomy (Dulay, Burt and Krashen, 1982).

According to table 1, total number of errors relevant to surface taxonomy extracted from elicitation test administered to the Persian-speaking learners of English was 260. The highest number of errors were respectively related to omission errors (51.92%), Misformation (26.92%), addition (18.84%) and misordering errors (2.30%).

Table 1
Number and Percentage of Surface Strategy Taxonomies for the Errors of Persian-Speaking Learners of English

Kind of error	Omission	Addition	Misordering	Misformation	Total number
Number	135	49	6	70	260
Percent	51.92	18.84	2.30	26.92	100

Following table summarizes errors made by English children learning English as their mother tongue. As depicted in Table 2, English children made 34 different types of errors relevant to surface taxonomy. The highest

number of errors can respectively categorized as omission errors (41.7%), misordering (26.47%), addition (23.52%) and misordering (8.82%).

Table 1
Number and Percentage of Surface Strategy Taxonomies for the Errors of Persian-Speaking Learners of English

Kind of error	Omission	Addition	Misordering	Misformation	Total number
Number	14	8	3	9	34
Percent	41.7	23.52	8.82	26.47	100

To test the hypothesis of the study-Errors made by Persian-speaking learners of English are very similar to those made by children learning English as their mother tongue, a comparison of errors made by learners of English and errors made by children learning English as their mother tongue can be of help. Comparing the findings in table 1 and 2 reveals the same order for the frequency of errors made by both groups of respondents (English children and Persian-speaking learners of English). Therefore, the highest frequency and percentage of the errors for both groups were respectively related to omission, misformation, addition and misordering errors. However, some differences in the percentage of each type of errors found between two groups. For example, 51.92% of Persian-speaking learners of English were omission errors while it was 41.7% for English children learning English as mother tongue. To identify if this difference is meaningful and significant, chi-square was conducted as was shown in the following table.

Table 3
Chi-square between Errors Made by Children Learning English as L1 and Turkish- and Persian-Speaking Students Learning English as L2

	Omission	Addition	Misordering	Misformation
L1 Learners	14	8	3	9
L2 Learners	9	7	3	7
$\chi^2 = 0.34153$	$P > .05$			

Chi-square taken among the errors of English children learning English as mother tongue referred to as L1 learners in the table and Persian-speaking learners of English referred to as L2 learners in table 2 showed no significant difference among the errors of these two groups. The obtained chi-square was 0.34153. In comparison with the critical value ($\chi^2 = 7.81473$), it became clear that the difference is not significant and meaningful. Therefore, the hypothesis of the study is accepted and it is concluded that L1 and L2 learners of

English made similar type of errors.

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.

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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