

Errors in Students' Use of English: A Study of Syntactic Transfer in Written Production.

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ABSTRACT: *This article investigated the possible errors second language learners make in the target language with reference to Igbo learners of English. The research focused on different types of syntactic errors. It used 120 students of SS 11 who were given sets of multiple questions with options to choose the appropriate answers. Errors were examined with respect to differences between English and Igbo language in some syntactic areas through a contrastive analysis between both languages. The results reveal errors relative to transfer of learning, language transfer, overgeneralization of rules of the second language, as well as strategies of second language communication, evidence that errors are inevitable in second language learning and can be minimized through effective teaching targeted on differences between the learner's first language and the target language.*

KEYWORDS: *Error, Fossilization, Mistake, Second language learning, language transfer.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Second Language learning has attracted serious attention of applied linguists. Adults, according to [1] have two independent systems for developing ability in second languages: subconscious language acquisition (Second language acquisition) and conscious language learning (Second language learning). Second language learning is characterized by conscious and formal presentation of explicit rules and error correction [2]. Error correction and explicit teaching of rules are relevant to second language learning [3]. Error correction is maintained in second language learning as a way of helping learners come to the correct mental representation of the linguistic generalization. In second language learning, the learner is engaged in a process of discovering the language. He forms hypotheses based on language input and tests those hypotheses in speech production [4]. This implies that errors are not only inevitable but also a necessary feature of learner language. If that is the case, what are the different types of errors second language learners, in this case Igbo learners of English make in the target language (English)? what then are the causes of these errors in the second language?. What importance has the learner's first language on the production in second language (L2)?

The learner's errors, according to [5], represent the discrepancy between the transitional competence of that learner and the target language. Error analysis, at best, can provide negative evidence concerning certain aspects of the language that have not been acquired by the learner at a particular time. [6] and [7] through their works, proved that both transfer and direct acquisition of L2 are important components in an adequate account of second language learning. [7] also made a significant input on this theory, adding that transfer is not necessarily a native language influence. If the learner knows two languages, the knowledge of both languages may affect his acquisition of a third language. Bearing this in mind, he defines *language transfer* as "the influence resulting from the similarities and differences between the language and any other language that has been previously (and perhaps imperfectly) acquired" (p.27). Although the notion of transfer in particular, and contrastive analysis hypothesis in general have been criticized by many linguists [8];[9], their pedagogical and universal importance are expounded by [10] where they claim that second language (L2) learners attempt to reduce the burden and the

effort of learning as much as possible by focusing on the most notable areas of language which they observe as easy, and by depending on whatever that might help. In order to expedite the process of second language learning, beginners rely on their first language, or perhaps other languages they may know. Learners carry over prior knowledge (features of their first language) to subsequent learning (target language) [11]. There are two types of transfer: positive and negative. In positive transfer, there is the use of prior knowledge in the learning of the target language, and this knowledge is accelerates progress in the learning of the target language. Positive transfer, according to Brown can only be possible if and only if the two languages, the previously learned and the target language have similarities in terms of grammar, for example, word order. Negative transfer, however, occurs when the previous knowledge (first language) disrupts the performance of a second task (target language).

Negative transfer in this essence is seen as an impediment to learning the new language [12];[13]. Learners begin by transferring sounds (phonetic transfer) and meanings (semantic transfer), syntactic transfer, and pragmatic transfer. Transfer diminishes when the learner progresses and gains more exposure with the target language.

The descriptivist-structuralist approach [14] in [15] looked at transfer as a way of supporting the usefulness of contrastive analysis as a basis for language pedagogy. The intuitive appeal of contrastive analysis hypothesis (CAH) is evident at the phonological level where according to [9] from the speech of the learner alone, we can detect foreign accents and be able to infer where the learner comes from. CAH, according to [16], is still good in understanding students' problems, and following [8] the various forms of transfer are too obvious to be ignored. A study of the learner's language (inter language) helps to reveal the kind of errors they make. The most obvious approach to analyzing inter language, according to [11] is to study the speech and the writing of learners. The speech and writing of learners (production data) are observable unlike learner's comprehension which is more difficult to study since it is not directly observable. For an analyst to analyze learner language in an appropriate perspective, Brown claims that he has to make a distinction between mistakes and errors. [11] defines a *mistake* as "a performance error that is either a random guess or a slip in that it is a failure to utilize a known system correctly. [17], sees mistake as what materializes as a result of fatigue or inattention. Everybody makes mistakes, in both native and second language situations. Mistake, according to Brown, is not the result of a deficiency in competence, but the result of some sort of temporary breakdown or imperfection in the process of producing speech. Mistakes, according to [18], can be corrected when attention is called to them. *Error*, on the hand, reflects gaps in a learner's knowledge [17]. Brown claims that an error is a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker. It reflects the competence of the learner. Ellis argues that errors materialize since the learner is not aware of the correct rule or structure. [18], records that errors cannot be self corrected and in the words of [19], "an error is a product of the learner's current stage of L2 development or underlying competence. Inter language elements, according to [20], 'are the result of clear overgeneralization of target language rules and semantic features'. The study of errors takes on great significance in the field of second language learning. The fact that we can observe, analyze, and classify errors to reveal something of the system operating within the learner, according to [11], led applied linguists to embark on the area of study of learner's errors called "error analysis". Error analysis as Brown further claims is different from contrastive analysis in the sense that it exhausts all possible sources of errors, not just those resulting from negative transfer of the native language. Error analysis, however, keeps an analyst closely focused on the specific languages rather than viewing universal aspects of language. This present work examines learner's errors and their possible sources as accomplished in error analysis. It brings closely, the errors committed by the subjects in the light of the differences between the learner's first language and the target language as well as their learning strategies. Before we present the procedures for data collection, we have to explain the notion of *fossilization* [21] Fossilizable linguistic phenomena, according to [21] are "linguistic items, rules and subsystems which speakers of a particular native language (NL) tend to keep in their inter language (IL)". When the learner's inter language yields errors that are as a result of the native language, we are dealing with errors of language transfer. If it is experimentally demonstrated that fossilizable items, rules and subsystems are a result of identifiable items, rules, and subsystems in training procedures, then we are dealing with error of transfer of training. If they

are a result of overgeneralization of the target language linguistic rules, then we are dealing with error of overgeneralization, and if they are a result of the inability of the learner to use the correct form of verbs in communication, then we are dealing with error of subject agreement.

II. METHOD

The data was collected from Igbo learners of English. The population of the study is drawn from senior secondary students (SS 11) from Marvelous International School in Umuahia, Umuahia North Local Government. Out of the 150 students in SS 11 class, a total of 120 Igbo bilinguals were selected using simple random sampling. This group of students was chosen because it is believed that they are the class that will yield the inter language that is needed for this study (having received formal instruction in English which is a compulsory subject in their studies for five years at the secondary level).

III. INSTRUMENT OF DATA COLLECTION

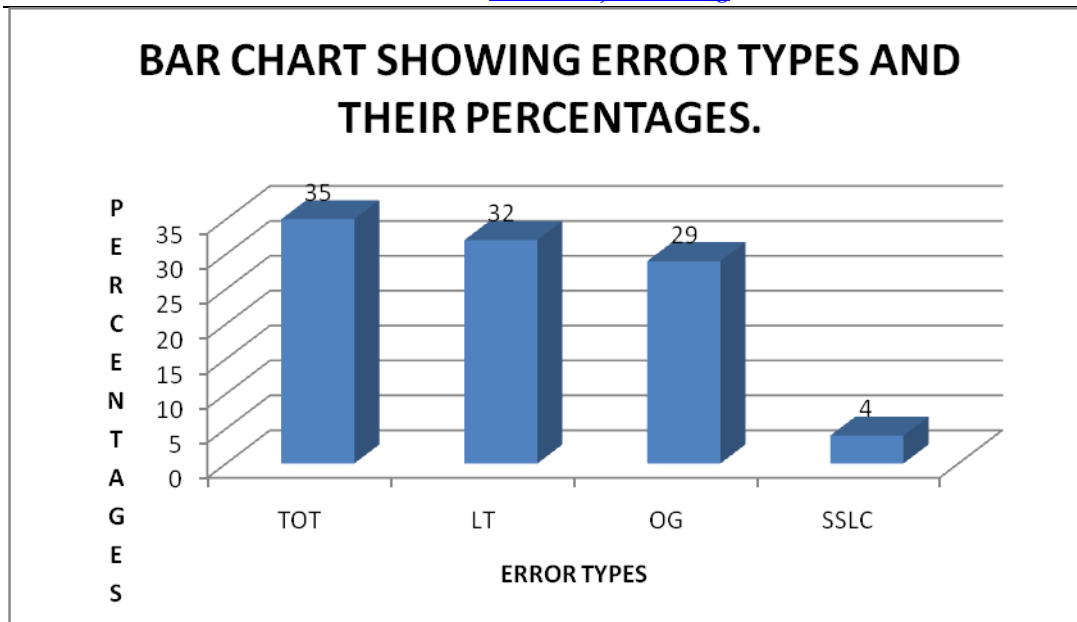
Data were generated using a passage comprising multiple choice questions with options in which the subjects were instructed to choose the appropriate option to fill in the gaps. The passage was constructed to yield useful information about learning process in L2 (English) especially in the use of English articles, non count nouns, pluralization of irregular nouns in English as well as concord in English. Errors were studied relative to the differences between Igbo and English through a contrastive analysis between both languages in problematic syntactic areas. Errors in the passage were identified, described and explained in the context of cross linguistic influence and learning strategies. The description classified elicited errors into:

- Transfer of training errors (TOT)
- Error of language transfer (LT)
- Error of overgeneralization (OG)
- Error of strategies of second language communication(SSLC)

IV. FINDINGS

Table 1. The Percentages and the Frequencies of Occurrences of the Errors Made By the Subjects.

Error type	Frequency	Percentages
Transfer of training errors(TOT)	380	35%
Error of language transfer (LT)	344	32%
Error of overgeneralization (OG)	312	29%
Error of strategies of second language communication(SSLC)	48	4%



The table and bar chart above reveal error due to transfer of training which has a frequency of 380 (35%) of the total number of errors. Typical examples of this error type include:

Passage	Subjects' choice	Correct form
It's best to let ---take its course	It's best to let <i>the nature</i> take its course	It's best to let <i>nature</i> take its course
The Tivs produce ---artifacts for exhibition	The Tivs produce <i>an intellectual</i> artifacts for exhibition	The Tivs produce <i>intellectual</i> artifacts for exhibition.
---is bilinguls' study guide	<i>Thesaurus</i> is bilinguals' study guide	<i>The thesaurus</i> is bilinguals' study guide.
The news of his resignation was --- - to my ears	The news of his resignation was <i>a music</i> to me	The news of his resignation was <i>music</i> to me.
Driving is just as much ---as teaching	Driving is just as much <i>a practical</i> work as teaching	Driving is just as much <i>practical</i> work as teaching

Error of language transfer has a frequency of 344 (32%) of the total number of errors as shown on the table and bar chart above. Examples of this error type as extracted from the passage given to the subjects include:

Passage	Subjects' choice	Correct form
All the ---- unraveled are untrue to the best of my knowledge	All the <i>informations</i> unraveled are untrue to the best of my knowledge.	All the <i>information</i> unraveled are untrue to the best of my knowledge
Ken offered useful ---- to me	Ken offered useful <i>advices</i> to me	Ken offered useful <i>advice</i> to me.
The room was full of ----	The room was full of <i>smokes</i>	The room was full of <i>smoke</i>
They provided four new--	They provided four new <i>softwares</i>	They provided four new <i>software</i> .

The table and bar chart above further revealed error of overgeneralization of plural morpheme which has a frequency of 312 (29%) of the total number of errors. typical examples include:

The Engineer procured new ---for the work	The Engineer procured new <i>equipments</i> for the work	The Engineer procured new <i>equipment</i> for the work.
All ---must be checked in before departure time	All <i>luggages</i> must be checked in before departure time	All <i>luggage</i> must be checked in before departure time.

Error of strategies of second language learning has a frequency of 48 (4%) of the total number of errors extracted from the passage administered to the subjects. Typical examples include:

The news ---as authentic as the teller	The news <i>are</i> as authentic as the teller	The news <i>is</i> as authentic as the teller.
Your secret is ---with me	Your secret if save with me	Your secret is safe with me
Many Nigerians lost their ---during South African xenophobic attacks	Many Nigerians lost their lives during xenophobic attacks	Many Nigerians lost their lives during South African xenophobic attacks.

V. DISCUSSION

The subjects made greater errors with articles (35%). In English, definite articles, among other functions, are used to make definite/specific reference in all classes of noun (the students, the girl), make reference to unique things, and make generic reference. Indefinite articles are used to make indefinite specific reference with singular count nouns that are not known. The subjects made greater errors with articles because Igbo lacks both definite and indefinite articles. They have been taught that articles are used to make definite reference in all classes of nouns but some studies provide instances in which definite, specific reference uses zero article instead of the definite article when reference is made to institutions (university, prison), time of the day (night, day) transportation (bus, train), people (society, nature) (often with prepositions). Some of these exceptions are not emphasized during training (instruction) hence resulting to error of transfer of training. The subjects used indefinite article *an*, superfluously with plural noun phrase (e.g *an intellectual articles*). Indefinite article is used to denote indefinite specific reference only with singular count nouns. Again, well known books like Bible, Koran, Thesaurus take definite article because it is used to make homophoric reference but the subjects omitted the definite article in Thesaurus. The indefinite determiner *much* cannot co-occur with indefinite determiner *a* in an utterance as recorded by the subjects (Driving is as much a practical work as teaching). [22]attribute error of transfer of training to cultural differences between the target language (TL) and the first language (FL) which can only be minimized through effective instruction.

Error of language transfer constitutes 32% of the total number of errors made by the subjects. These are errors that occurred because the subjects attempted to impose countability on non count nouns by using plural morpheme /s/ in English (advices, informations, etc). In English, countability is expressed on non count nouns by using phrasal quantifiers (a great deal of, a large number of) or partitives (a pint of, a glass of). Igbo lacks phrasal quantifiers and some of the English partitives cannot be approximated in Igbo. The subjects were unable to make clear distinction of which nouns are count or non count because such intuitive subcategorization of count and non count is not made in Igbo nouns. They transferred the treatment of Igbo nouns to English. All these contributed to the kinds of errors they made. This result supports [23] study who examined the causes of errors made by Arabic learners of English as a second language and his findings proved that most of the errors Arabic students made during translation were due to differences in the linguistic systems of English and Arabic.

Error of overgeneralization of plural rules on nouns constitutes 22% of the total number of errors made by the subjects. This error occurred because the subjects affixed plural morpheme to zero morpheme nouns that do not require affixes for pluralization (furnitures, luggages, etc). Overgeneralization errors result from broad application of pluralization rule in second language. Considering the result, it strongly supports the work of [1] whose results showed that errors Arabic students made were as a result of overgeneralization of L2 rules in the target language.

Error of strategies of second language communication constitutes 4% of the total number of errors by the subjects. This error type recorded a low percentage because the subjects employed difference strategies through which they approached second language (English) due to their various family social strata, ages, sex, and motivation. These are errors that occurred from wrong choice of verb forms (the news *are* as authentic as the teller), inability to use appropriate noun form (many Nigerians lost their *lives*....) inability to use appropriate adjective (your secret is *save* with me).

VI. CONCLUSIONS

From the above discussion, the study concludes that the errors made by subjects were as a result of transfer of training, transfer of the features of their first language, overgeneralization of the rules of the target language (English) as well as errors due to strategies of second language communication. The result is an evidence that errors are inevitable in second language learning and can be minimized through error correction and teaching targeted on the differences between the learner's first language and the target language through a contrastive analysis between both languages in problematic areas. Effective training provides learners with the correct mental representation of the linguistic generalization in second language.

VII. IMPLICATION OF THE STUDY

The above conclusion implies that differences in the learner's first and target language linguistic systems give rise to errors, and that contrastive analysis (CA) is a valid diagnostic tool for predicting in advance, learners' difficulties and the level of difficulty in L2 learning. Consequently, the result of contrastive analysis must be appropriated in second language teaching if learners must achieve native speaker norms. Again, CA should be pursued with renewed vigour as done in the 1960's especially in African and Asian countries

To bring these factors to bear, suggestions of future research are made to investigate other factors that affect second language learning, especially age and motivation.

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